

L A N D S   A N D   P E O P L E S

# BELGIUM

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THE RIVER SAMBRE AT NAMUR

THE LANDS AND PEOPLES SERIES

*BELGIUM*

*by*

G. M. ASHBY

WITH FOUR PLATES IN COLOUR  
AND ELEVEN PHOTOGRAPHS

LONDON  
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

FIRST PUBLISHED 1915  
BY A. AND C. BLACK LTD.  
4, 5, AND 6 SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W.I

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, LONDON AND EDINBURGH

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I should like to express my grateful thanks to Mlle Flora Serruys, Mlle Marthe van Weddingen, M. Paul Hellyn of *La Maison des Jeunes*, Brussels, and to the staff of the Belgian National Tourist Office. I should also like to thank M. René Meurant for his valuable help on folklore and giants.

G. M. A.

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\* *These four plates are in colour, from  
paintings by Amédée Forestier*

# NORTH SEA



MAP OF  
**BELGIUM**

## THE LAND OF BELGIUM

BELGIUM, which is about one and a half times the size of Wales, is one of the most thickly populated areas in Europe. The country is bordered on the north by Holland, on the east by Germany and Luxembourg, and on the south and west by France and the North Sea.

Since earliest times, Belgium's position at the crossroads of Europe, and her absence of mountain barriers, have made the country the easy prey of invaders. After the Roman occupation, tribes of Germans (Franks), who spoke Germanic dialects, swept over the northern plain, driving the Celtic population into the south. To-day, the descendants of the Franks, the Flemings, who live in the northern part of the country, still speak a different language from the descendants of the Celts, the Walloons, who speak French. Geographically, Belgium is divided into two by the Meuse and its tributary the Sambre, but an imaginary line drawn across the country from Tournai on the west to Maastrict on the east, marks the "language frontier". Flemish is spoken north of this line—in the provinces of Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg, and part of Brabant, while to the south, French is spoken. As a result, maps and railway tickets are printed in both languages, and there are French and Flemish books, newspapers, and magazines. In Parliament, the Walloon members speak French, and the Flemish representatives Flemish, so that the translation

system is used. Every line of a speech is translated immediately by someone knowing both languages, and members only have to pick up the telephone in front of them in order to follow the speech which they cannot understand.

Many Flemings, of course, know French, and can speak, read, and write it. Brussels is in the Flemish part of Belgium but, because it is the capital, and visited by many foreigners, most Bruxellois are bilingual. Although, by law, a second language is not compulsory, children in practically every Flemish school are compelled to learn French.

Although many Belgians have a thorough knowledge of French, they speak it with an accent of their own, which is unlike anything you hear in France, just as English people speak French or German with an English accent.

The Germanic language of the Flemings is the same as Dutch, and the Flemings and the Dutch, as well as being able to speak easily with one another, can read and understand the same literature although they sometimes use different words. The Flemings know that a person is Dutch as soon as they hear him speak, just as we immediately recognise an American.

The north of the country, behind the narrow belt of dunes fringing the sea-coast, is a low-lying plain, a continuation of the North European plain of Germany and Russia. Much of the northern plain, particularly in the Limburg province, is a sandy region of heaths, dunes, and pinewoods, and agriculture has been made possible only by continual fertilisation of the barren sand. Belgium, with her small area and large population, has to

use every inch of available land for agriculture, and in West Flanders much of the farmland was once a waste of salt marshes. This land which has been reclaimed from the North Sea is called polder country, and most of the farms of the polders are surrounded by wide canals filled with water. In this area, because the land is below, or very near sea-level, there are many drainage problems, and dykes are needed to keep back the sea.

Belgium is very rich in mineral wealth, and her many heavy industries have developed as a result of the coal deposits. One of the busiest industrial areas is in the south-west province of Hainaut, particularly around Mons and Charleroi, a region of pits and slag heaps. A hundred years ago this mining country was agricultural land, but nowadays farms have given way to smoking chimneys, and on land that once was devoted entirely to agriculture, glass factories, blast furnaces, and pottery works have sprung up.

The province of Limburg is another area which has great possibilities for future development. Until the discovery of coal, Limburg, a sandy wilderness overrun with gorse and heather, was the most unproductive part of the country. The new townships which have grown up round the pitheads, as a contrast to the mining towns of Hainaut, are modern and well planned, and the houses are surrounded by pleasant gardens.

In the south of Belgium are the hills and valleys of the Ardennes. This undulating tableland, with its streams, rocky gorges, caverns, and castles, is a continuation of the mountain range of Rhineland, and although not as fertile as the rest of the country,

it has within its small area the most varied scenery in Belgium. Once a region of continuous forest, there are still patches of woodland where the wild boar is hunted. The Ardennes is also a land of folklore, peopled, if we are to believe the many legends, by tribes of tiny fairies rather like Irish leprechauns. These "nutons" are friendly little creatures, and are supposed to do jobs for those who leave gifts of bread, milk, or honey outside the openings of their caves.

In the Middle Ages, when towns like Bruges, Ghent, Ypres, and Antwerp were rich through commerce, the burghers used their wealth to beautify the towns. That is why, to-day, Belgium, particularly in her northern cities, has so many buildings of historic interest. From the cloth of Flanders rose magnificent churches, belfries, cloth halls, guild houses, and town halls. Men were proud of their craftsmanship; the buildings with their statuary work, richly ornamented pinnacles and stone tracery, could have been built only in an age when there was no hurry or bustle, and when stonemasons took infinite pains with everything they fashioned. This Gothic type of architecture, with its pointed arches and high steep roofs, is typical of hundreds of buildings all over Belgium.

The town halls of Belgium, especially those of Brussels, Louvain and Audenaerde, are world famous. The wealthy burghers of medieval times were so proud of their civic buildings that they commissioned the finest painters, sculptors, and ironsmiths to beautify and enrich them. Many of the buildings still possess these costly art treasures —paintings and tapestries, beautifully panelled

walls and ceilings, carved wooden chests decorated with the faces of plump-cheeked curly-haired cherubs, and immense sculptured fireplaces, the stone figures depicting some historical or biblical incident. These fireplaces were built in the days when men rode long distances in all kinds of weathers, and so that they could stretch their legs and bodies right into the fireplaces without falling into the flames, special hand grips were often constructed underneath the mantels.

The town halls were strongholds of freedom, and when the lords threatened their liberties, the citizens met in the Grand' Place at the foot of the belfry, in front of the town hall, or around the statues or "perrons". These symbols meant so much to the people that the lords often took them away. Liège, the "Fiery City", was continually struggling for independence from her overlords, and in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the citizens revolted against the House of Burgundy, Charles the Bold retaliated by removing their "perron" to Bruges, where it remained until it was returned ten years later by his daughter, Mary. But the lords did not always have everything their own way. In Louvain, during the fourteenth century, the burgomaster, while on his way to Brussels to complain about the behaviour of the nobles, was killed by two knights. The people, when the news reached them, were so angry that the nobles who had fled to the safety of the town hall were thrown out of the windows on to the upturned pikes of the mob below.

The life of the Belgian towns has always centred round the cobbled Grand' Place. Here, almost as if it were a stage, an endless pageant of history has

taken place. Uprisings against tyrannical lords, revolutions, executions, the triumphant entry of troops—the Grand' Place has seen them all. No Belgian Grand' Place is complete without its “belfroi”, which, rising from the town hall or cloth exchange, has, during past centuries, guarded the citizens' Charter of Rights. The documents setting forth the ancient privileges of the guilds were kept in immense oak chests, the lids of which were a complicated maze of locks. As a safeguard, ten keys were needed to open the chests—the burgomaster had one, and the other nine were kept by the heads of the guilds.

Many of the belfries contain a carillon, a set of bells for playing melodies. Carillon concerts are popular all over Belgium; in fact, an English author has called Belgium “The Land of Chimes”. The bells are worked by electricity, and played by a pianist at a keyboard.

The Grand' Place is still the hub of Belgian life. When the day's work is finished, the many little pavement cafés round the square begin to fill with people out for an evening's enjoyment. During the summer months many of the historic buildings are floodlit, and from the cafés with their striped awnings and gaily painted tubs of flowers, one can watch the life of the town go by. Flower and vegetable markets, carillon concerts, pageants, processions—everything takes place on the Grand' Place, and although throughout the centuries the buildings may have been damaged or destroyed by war, like the Phoenix of old, they continue to rise triumphant from the ashes.

## II

## THE PEOPLE OF BELGIUM

THE Belgians, both Flemings and Walloons, are a nation of workers. Their country is one of the most thickly populated areas in Europe, and competition for work and wealth is fierce. Although the big stores close at fixed hours, a great number of the smaller shops are open until ten or eleven at night, and the Belgian housewife if she wishes can do her shopping on Sundays, as many of the pastry shops, butchers', and greengrocers' remain open all the week-end. Everybody, too, is responsible for keeping clean the pavement in front of their house or shop. In the mornings, the pavements run with water, as the housewife, in what seems to be a daily ritual, mops through her home with buckets of water hosing the pavement and often the walls and windows as well.

Perhaps the most important part of a Belgian home is the kitchen; certainly everyone tends to congregate there. The people love good food, and spend much longer preparing it than we do in England. Breakfast, as in most Continental countries, is a light meal consisting of coffee, rolls, or slices of bread, butter, and jam, with sometimes the addition of cheese. School meals are not general, and the majority of families go home for the midday meal. The food is rich; a great deal of vegetable soup is eaten, and vegetables, when served with meat, are cooked in butter or margarine. Meat is usually eaten at least once a day: beef, pork, veal,

lamb, or horse-meat, but rarely mutton. The butchers' shops, with their tiled walls and patterned stone floors, are festooned with strings of sausages. The smoked sausages, which are called *charcuterie*, and also the black and white variety, *boudin blanc* and *boudin noir*, are often sold by the yard. The Belgians, although they eat very few puddings and pies, are especially fond of *pâtisseries*, the delicious cream cakes which fill the windows of the pastry shops. These rich cakes are eaten at the end of a meal, and with afternoon coffee. Since the war, many people have acquired a liking for tea, but coffee is the national beverage and, in a Belgian home the coffee percolator seems to live continuously on the kitchen stove. Coffee is taken black, or with very little milk and sugar, and most families grind their own coffee to make sure of getting the full flavour. In the early morning, particularly in Brussels and in the larger towns, the air is filled with the smell of freshly ground coffee, while in the evening there is often a smell of boiling oil. The Belgians are very fond of chips ; most towns have *friteries*, and sometimes, especially on market days, and at fairs, there are stalls on the pavements or in the Grand' Place, the tanks of boiling fat kept hot by cylinders of calor gas.

The weekly market day, particularly in the country, provides the farmer and his wife with an opportunity of meeting their friends and neighbours. The market, which is usually held on the cobbled Grand' Place, contains everything that the country housewife is likely to need. On the ground, beside the rows of clogs and the thick blue and white coffee bowls, are lines of cooking utensils—saucepans,

kettles, and buckets of red, green, and yellow enamel. In addition to the usual food stalls, there are stalls with rolls of material and farming clothes—blue dungarees and peaked caps, cheap black and white dresses and overalls. Many of the stalls also have children's overalls; pink and blue gingham for the girls, and black cotton for the boys. Uniform is not worn in the majority of Belgian schools, but in its place the children wear overalls to protect their clothes. Generally, the choice is left to the individual, but in many girls' schools the overalls are of the same design and colour.

The week-end in Belgium is not kept in the same way as it is in England. On Saturday afternoons, especially in the country, the housewife is busy cleaning and cooking, but Sunday, after Mass, is a public holiday. Extra trains are run, the cafés are full, and in the side streets the stallholders of the pavement markets are out to catch the Sunday crowds. However, in spite of this Continental Sunday, the Belgians are a deeply religious people, and by the roadsides and in niches in the farm walls, there are many wayside shrines. Behind the glass doors of the shrine, there is usually a statue of Christ on the Cross, the Virgin and Child, or a simple altar surrounded by flowers. Most Belgian homes also have their own little shrine; a cross above the mantelpiece and, below it, a glass case containing a statue of Christ or the Virgin. On Sundays, the whole family goes to Mass; the children in their best clothes, and their mother and grandmother, according to Continental custom, often dressed entirely in black. The church they visit may have been restored or rebuilt during the

centuries, but its treasures—the oil paintings, the wooden carvings on pulpit and choir stalls, the chiselled rood screen and statues, have often escaped devastation. The interior of a Belgian church is very ornate; the stone pillars usually have life-sized statues on them, and there are many other gilt or brightly coloured statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary, each with its row of brass candlesticks underneath.

August 15th (the Ascension Day of the Virgin Mary), Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and 1st November are religious holidays in Belgium. November 1st is All Saints Day and 2nd November, All Souls Day. On these days the Catholic Church especially remembers and prays for the dead. The schoolchildren then have their half-term holidays, and as well as going to church to pray for their relatives, everyone visits the cemeteries and puts chrysanthemums on their graves.

Belgian children have to work very hard at school. Lessons often start at eight o'clock and, if Thursday afternoon is a holiday, Saturday may be counted as part of the school week. Sport plays a very small part in the curriculum, and they rarely play matches against other schools. Although there is a little physical training, swimming and perhaps basketball for the girls, athletics and the playing of games like cricket, hockey, rounders, and lacrosse are unknown. Discipline is strict, and the standard of formal education very high. Unfortunately, the curriculum is so heavy with academic work that outside activities, clubs, school magazines, plays, and concerts, are all considered a waste of time. Some

A GANNET IN WEST INDIES





schools have form captains and school prefects, but they have very little responsibility and are not trained to act on their own initiative. In most schools the children have homework from about the age of eight, and although the high standard reached by Belgian children is greatly to be admired, it seems a pity that more time is not found for games and for the development of creative talents.

In Belgium, young people remain more with their parents than they do in England. There are scarcely any youth clubs, but at some time during the year every town and village has a *kermesse*—a kind of fair which lasts for two or three days. The word, *kermesse*, which is French, is derived from the Flemish, *kermis* (*kerk*—church, *mis*—mass), and means a special mass said on the feast day of the patron saint of the village. Years ago, on *kermesse* Sunday, when people rode into the villages from the distant farmhouses, a table was put outside the church with food and drink for the travellers. Gradually, the feast became bigger and bigger, more stalls were added, and now the *kermesse* has come to mean the time of the annual fair. These fairs, with their nougat and doughnut stalls, are a great feature of Belgian life. The *kermesse* was a favourite subject of Flemish painters, who depicted on their canvases the people's love of dancing, eating, and drinking.

During the *kermesse*, everyone is out to enjoy themselves. Children stay up late, and the streets are thronged with family parties. Strings of flags decorate the houses and shops, and at night the streets are festooned with coloured lights. There is

sure to be a fair with roundabouts for the children, and a shooting booth where father can try his luck. The streets are so noisy that it is difficult to make oneself heard. Loudspeakers relaying the latest tunes blare forth from every corner, and as each street often has two or three tunes playing at the same time, the noise is deafening.

On the Monday of the *kermesse*, which is a holiday for the local schoolchildren, a special service is held in church in memory of everyone who has died during the year, and in the procession which takes place at this time, the statue of the patron saint of the church is carried through the village.

### III

## BELGIAN HISTORY

AT the beginning of the Christian era, the country we now call Belgium was inhabited by tribes of Celts (Walloons), who had come from beyond the Rhine. "Of all these tribes", says Caesar, who fought seven campaigns against them, "the *Belgae* are the most courageous." However, in the end, the emperor broke their resistance, and gradually the Latin language and laws were introduced into the country, and the Christian faith preached by missionaries.

When the power of Rome declined, and the country became part of the Frankish kingdom, it was ruled over by two royal lines, and after the death of Charlemagne (814), the greatest king of the second dynasty, the vast empire which he had won was divided into three and ruled by his grandsons. Soon, however, the powerful lords procured dukedoms for themselves by theft, marriage, or barter. In the middle of the ninth century, Baudouin the Iron Arm established himself as the first Count of Flanders, and gradually the other states began to take shape. Each province was ruled over by some duke, count, or baron who often owed allegiance to the French king or the Holy Roman Emperor. If you look at the map you will see where the states lay; the most important nobles were the Dukes of Brabant, the Counts of Flanders and Namur, the Lords of Malines, and the Bishop-Princes of Liège. The greatest of the states was

Flanders, for the Flemish cities like Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres, became strong and rich through their trade and manufactures. It might almost be said that for many years the history of Belgium was the history of Flanders.

In the towns, both in Flanders and the other states, the merchants and tradesmen banded themselves together in societies called guilds. The guilds, like those of the weavers and butchers, defended themselves so well against the nobles who often tried to attack their liberties, that the towns became strongholds of freedom. The guildsmen fought not only their lords, but anyone, however powerful, whom they considered unjust and likely to take away their privileges.

When Philip the Fair, King of France and over-lord of Flanders, sent tax-collectors to refill his empty treasury, two men of Bruges, Pieter de Coninck and Jan Breydel, the heads of the weavers' and butchers' guilds, organised a secret league, vowing revenge on the "Lilies of France" and all who were friendly with them. As the lion was the heraldic beast of Flanders, these Flemish patriots called themselves "guardians of the lion's claws". Although for a time the rebels left Bruges and camped near Damme, three miles away, they had many friends in the town, such as the powerful craftsmen and burghers, and on 18th May 1302, when the matins bell sounded from a nearby monastery, the Flemings stole up to the city walls, overpowered the guards, and poured into the sleeping town. The houses were searched, and those who proved their French nationality by being unable to pronounce the difficult Flemish words—

“schild en vriend” (shield and friend), were mercilessly slaughtered.

Philip obtained the help of two kings to conquer the stubborn Flemings, and collected a large army composed of all the nobility of western Christendom. This army, under the command of Robert, Comte d'Artois, crossed the frontier near Lille and, marching through Flanders, set fire to the churches, cottages, and castles that lay in its path. For once the cities forgot their enmities as men from Bruges, Ghent, Ypres, Furnes, and Poperinghe camped outside the walls of Courtrai. By daybreak the Flemings had gathered behind the banners of their towns and guilds; they were not mounted but, fastening themselves together like the ancient Gauls, had taken up positions on marshy ground criss-crossed by ditches. The battle raged all day, and the men of Flanders, armed with lances and their national weapon the *goedendag*, a kind of heavy stick with iron points, proved a formidable foe. When the French cavalry were ordered to charge, they trampled down their own infantry, and then became bogged in the marshy ground. By nightfall, the Flemings had won the battle, and the flag of Flanders—a black lion rampant on a cloth of gold, fluttered bravely from many a Flemish “belfrio”. The cavaliers of that day wore a single spur and, after the battle, seven hundred golden spurs were gathered from the field and hung up in the church of Notre Dame at Courtrai, to celebrate the victory of a citizen army over the chivalry of Europe. At the Battle of the Golden Spurs, the flower of the nobility perished and, although at certain periods the people were still under French

rule, from that time they were never completely dominated.

All this time, close at hand and watchful, was an important French duchy called Burgundy. In 1363, Philip the Bold was granted the Burgundian duchy by his father, John II, King of France. Six years later, Philip married Margaret, daughter of Louis of Male, the last Count of Flanders, and through this marriage, when Louis died without leaving a male heir, the Duke of Burgundy obtained possession of Flanders and Artois. In 1404, Philip's son, John the Fearless, succeeded to the dukedom. He reigned for fifteen years, and in 1419, after his assassination at the instigation of the French dauphin, was succeeded by his son Philip the Good.

By the time Philip the Good became Duke of Burgundy, his duchy occupied a position of importance in the Low Countries similar to that once held by the state of Flanders. Philip, a great lover of pomp and luxury, was the equal of kings and emperors. He ruled his estates wisely, was a patron of the arts, and encouraged commerce and industry.

When Philip died in 1467, his son Charles the Bold inherited the duchy. Much of his short reign was spent in trying to add to his territories and, in 1477, he was killed at the battle of Nancy, his body pierced by the halberds of Swiss pikemen who had come to the town's aid.

Mary, the daughter of Charles the Bold, and the last of the Burgundian line, married an Austrian Archduke called Maximilian. Although after her father's death the duchy proper passed to France, when she died after a fall from her horse while hawking in a wood near Bruges, Flanders, Brabant

and the other states of which the Dukes of Burgundy had gained control, came under the rule of the Austrian Royal Family—the House of Hapsburg.

Maximilian married both his children to children of the Spanish sovereign; Philip the Handsome married Joanna the Mad, daughter of the King of Spain, and the son of this marriage was Charles V, who was neither mad nor handsome, but one of the greatest men in history. Charles had his capital at Brussels, but the realm he ruled was even vaster than that of Charlemagne. This Holy Roman Emperor was King of Spain, ruler of Germany and Austria, King of Naples and Sicily, and ruler of Spain's rich possessions in the New World. The man who, it has been said: "had much more at the back of his head than he carried in his face", was forced to be at war for the greater part of his life, in order to keep his possessions from being invaded. In 1555, at the age of fifty-five, he gave up the throne and retired to a lonely Spanish monastery, the crown passing to his son, Philip II.

During the reign of Philip (1555-1598), the Belgian provinces had one of the worst periods in their history. The Spanish King who controlled the Netherlands by means of governors and garrisons of Spanish troops, hated the liberty which the people loved. They had, especially in the towns, been accustomed to make laws for themselves, which their old dukes and counts, and also the Hapsburgs, had always sworn to maintain. Philip, however, who wanted to be absolute ruler, resolved to put an end to the people's freedom. This was the period of the Reformation and, as Philip hated the Protestants, of whom there were many in the

Netherlands, he determined to destroy them. For this purpose, a special court was set up called the Inquisition, which inquired into the religious faith of the people, torturing and burning those who were not Catholics. At last, the people rebelled in defence of their liberties, and the chief Protestant leader, William the Silent, Prince of Orange, persuaded the southern Netherlands to unite with the northern. Philip sent the Duke of Alva to subdue the rebels, and during the "Revolt of the Netherlands" the country suffered some of the worst persecutions it has ever known. The Spanish King had a strong fleet and a great army, and his soldiers were cruel as well as highly trained. Men, women, and children were tortured, robbed, burnt to death, killed in battle and murdered in cold blood. Gradually the two Netherlands drifted apart, and although William was forced to withdraw from the south, the Dutch shook off the yoke of Spain and obtained their independence. Philip regained control of the south, and the Protestants escaped into the Dutch Netherlands, while on the other hand, persecution drove the Dutch Catholics into the Spanish Netherlands. After this division of the Netherlands, the two countries developed along entirely different lines, each with its own religious beliefs, customs, and political habits.

During the years which followed, the southern Netherlands were tossed backwards and forwards from one power to another. When Philip's daughter, Isabella, married an Austrian Archduke called Albert, they were given the southern Netherlands as a wedding present. However, in 1621, Albert died without leaving an heir, so that once more the

provinces came under the rule of the Spanish King (Philip IV).

The eighteenth century saw yet another change. After a succession of wars, the Catholic Lowlands, by the Treaty of Utrecht, were given back to Austria. Until Joseph II ascended the throne, the Austrian rule was on the whole a happy one. This "Enlightened Despot" was a good man and wise in many ways, but he tried to bring in laws and customs which the people did not like. In the revolution which followed, the country's future tricolour flag was flown for the first time—the black and yellow of Flanders and Brabant, and the yellow and red of Hainaut. The revolution ended soon after Joseph's death and, although the Austrians remained in power, there was another change at hand. The French Republicans drove out the Austrians, and the provinces were made part of France. Napoleon gave the name "Belgium" to the former Austrian Netherlands, and divided the country into nine departments which form the present-day provinces. After the emperor had been sent to Elba, the allies joined Belgium to Holland, making William of Orange, a descendant of William the Silent, ruler of the "Kingdom of the Netherlands". At the Battle of Waterloo, which was fought in June 1815, after Napoleon had escaped from Elba, a force of Netherlanders, some Dutch, some Belgian, fought under the Duke of Wellington. The great victory which he gained brought peace to Europe.

After the war, it was supposed that the Belgians would settle down and form one people with the Dutch, who spoke a language so like their own

Flemish, and who came of the same stock. It was not as simple as that, however. A spirit of nationalism was sweeping the country and, since the break-away in the seventeenth century, religious beliefs had separated the Netherlands into two very distinct countries. In September 1830, there was a revolution in the Belgian provinces of the new kingdom, and the martyrs' monument in Brussels is in memory of the Belgian patriots who lost their lives during the four days' fighting. The Dutch troops, who had occupied the palace and the adjoining park, were forced to evacuate, and after this "Glorious Revolution", the Belgians declared that they wished to be a free and independent country. On the 21st of July 1831, Belgium's National Day, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, a German prince who had become a naturalised Englishman, was crowned in Brussels as Leopold I, King of the Belgians. When Leopold died in 1865, the country had its own Parliament and Constitution, and had enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity.

Leopold II, during his long, eventful reign, endowed the country with a vast empire in Africa—the Belgian Congo, built fortifications along Belgium's eastern border, and reorganised the army. His last thoughts were for the defence and safety of his country; on his deathbed in 1909, he signed a law introducing compulsory military service for one son of each family. Unfortunately, none of these precautions saved Belgium from war, and the next king, a nephew of Leopold, Albert I, was to see his country invaded.

When Belgium became independent, the allies, who knew that ~~her~~ geographical position might

make her, as it had done so often in the past, the battlefield of Europe, declared the country to be a neutral state—that is, one which may not be attacked or entered by the armies of other nations or may not take part in the wars of other countries. However, in spite of this neutrality, Belgium has been invaded twice in the present century.

In the First World War, the courageous Belgian army, under the command of Albert, the "Soldier King", although driven from the greater part of the territory, defended a small piece of Belgian soil to the very end.

In the Second World War, very little defence was possible; the Belgian Air Force, taken by surprise, was almost wiped out in the first few hours and, although greatly outnumbered by the enemy, the army held out for eighteen days, until at last, by order of King Leopold III, the "Cease Fire" was sounded. The King of the Belgians, who insisted on being treated as a prisoner-of-war, retired to the Palace of Laeken outside Brussels, while his ministers moved to London to continue the fight. Belgian airmen fought in the Battle of Britain, helped to guard our shores against invasion, and served in the Royal Navy. At home, although occupied, the Belgians organised underground resistance movements, and printed secretly a monthly newspaper—*La Libre Belgique*.

After Belgium was liberated, there was a great deal of reconstruction work to do. In 1951, Leopold abdicated in favour of his son, Baudouin, and under his rule the country, which has worked hard to recover from the war, looks forward to a period of continuing prosperity.

## IV

## THE BELGIAN COASTLINE

THE seacoast of Belgium, because it is one of the easiest places on the Continent to reach, is very popular with English visitors. The coastline, a long, flat stretch of yellow sand backed by a ridge of sandhills, comes into view barely three hours after leaving the white chalk cliffs of Dover. There are no cliffs or shingle; except for clumps of coarse grass on the dunes, all is barren sand.

In winter, the coast is cold and stormy; there are sea mists and dark clouds, and sometimes showers of hail. The high winds blow the sand in all directions, often many miles inshore. Hundreds of years ago, these winter storms used to drive the waves ashore with such violence that the land was flooded, and whole villages were sometimes swept away. To protect their villages and keep back the water, the people built high banks of earth until there was a rampart along almost the entire coast. One of the first of these protective walls was built in the fourteenth century, and since that time Belgium has continued to build defences against the sea, to-day using brick, stone, and cement instead of earth.

The walls and red brick promenades are called *digues de mer*. From the top of the *digue* a stone wall slopes sharply to the sand, and at intervals along this wall a ramp or flight of steps gives access to the beach. However, on occasions, the sea still breaks through. In February of 1953, a violent storm raged along the coasts of Holland and

Belgium. The waves were so powerful that they smashed the doors and windows of hotels and villas lining the *digue*, lifting furniture out of the rooms and carrying it into the sea. Cement fortifications and gun emplacements were uprooted from the sandhills, the sea tossing them in the air like a child playing with a ball. Parts of the *digue* wall were smashed and water poured in through the breaches, flooding the fields and farmhouses of the low-lying polder country. In places, as much as twelve feet of sand was removed, laying bare the foundations of the *digue* wall, the beach cafés and changing rooms. Troops plugged the breaches with sandbags, and bulldozers and other mechanical devices were brought in to push up the sand from the edge of the water. Although the *digue* can always be repaired, new breakwaters constructed, and trees and wooden piles planted along the shifting sand dunes, the people of Belgium never know when another sudden storm may strike the coastline, doing untold damage and flooding the countryside which has taken years of patient struggle to wrest from the sea.

However, in summer all is changed; the sky is blue, the sands warm and the water shallow and safe for bathing. Belgian children have two months' holiday in the summer and in July and August hundreds of families flock to "Le Littoral" as the Belgians call their coastline. The coast is like one immense seaside resort, and although each town has its own *digue*, lined with a row of villas, cafés, and hotels, often the towns merge into each other, so that it is difficult to know where one ends and the next begins. In the dunes behind the *digue*, are more villas and hotels; the white villas with their

red-tiled roofs often surrounded by lawns, ornamental ponds, and flower gardens. The beaches are crowded with multi-coloured tents, deck chairs, and beach umbrellas, and on top of the *digue* and on the many flat-roofed changing rooms, are open-air cafés, gay with brightly painted tables and chairs, and lines of boxes and tubs filled with flowers. In places on the beach are railed-off enclosures where, for a small sum, it is possible to join a club and use the chutes, swings, and climbing bars. At certain beaches a charge is made for bathing, and although this sometimes puzzles English and American visitors, it is understandable when one realises the heavy cost of maintaining the beaches and repairing the walls.

At the coast there is something to suit all tastes; donkey rides for the children, regattas, archery practice in the dunes, and riding or walking in the pinewoods. Ostend has a race-course, and a modern Casino—the *Kursaal*, which was rebuilt after the war. The coast has many tennis courts and golf courses, and in the evening, for those who do not care for casinos and cinemas, there are firework displays and dancing in the open air.

At some of the resorts there is sand yachting, a popular and exciting sport. The four-wheeled yacht, with its steering wheel for the driver, and seats for one or two passengers behind, has a tall sail like a sea yacht, and with the wind billowing out the sail, it races over the sand at an incredible speed. Children can hire three-wheeler cycles with plywood animals attached to the front and, for adults, there are miniature cars which have a steering wheel and two sets of pedals. Ordinary motor-cars are not

allowed on the *digue*. A favourite pastime is motoring in these small cars along the *digue* from one resort to another. They go on the roads, and it is very amusing to see them dodging in and out of the traffic. The occupants, their feet hanging out of the bottom, have to pedal furiously in order to avoid the cars surging round them; Belgians drive very fast indeed, and soon become impatient if anything gets in their way. But there are also other means of transport for the visitor; modern electric trams travel to and fro along the forty-mile coast, and for those who want to see Ostend without the effort of walking over the cobbles, little horse-drawn carriages can be hired.

Even the dunes vary. They stretch inland for over two miles at La Panne, close to the French frontier, while the dunes at Knokke, at the other end of the coast, merge into pleasant beech and pine woods. Close to Knokke, and lying alongside the Dutch border, is the former dried-up sea arm of the Zwin, the river which was once the life-blood of Bruges. When the sea filled this estuary, the water, flowing past Damme and on to the old Hanseatic town, sometimes carried on its tides as many as seven hundred ships a day. To-day, the estuary is filled only once or twice during the year, at the time of the high tides. After remaining for a short time, the water gradually subsides, and the salt left behind in the soil, causes the growth of many unusual and beautiful flowers. In July and August the estuary is carpeted with a mass of blue flowers, and in spring it is the breeding ground of rare sea-birds. The Zwin, a kind of "No Man's Land" lying between the Belgian and Dutch

frontiers, has been declared a National Park so that the birds and flowers can be protected. To help people, particularly school children, to recognise the birds of the Zwin, a special aviary has been built in the nearby pinewoods. Here, during the summer, the sea-birds, many of which are not found in any other part of Belgium, can be studied at leisure. In winter, however, the majority of the birds are released so that they can return to the Zwin.

Although the Belgian coast depends so much on the tourist industry, hundreds of people obtain their livelihood by fishing. The important fishing ports are Ostend, Blankenberge, Zeebrugge, and Heist and, at the western end of the coast, the fishermen go shrimping on horses, riding out into the sea carrying baskets, and with nets fastened to long poles. From the end of Ostend pier, it is interesting to watch the little red and green fishing boats plough through the water. When the boats arrive in the harbour, the fishwives gather on the cobbled quayside with their go-carts, and soon the baskets are hauled up over the side, and the fish arranged on temporary stalls. In this part of Ostend there is always a smell of fish; the pavement in front of the harbour cafés is lined with stalls of shrimps, crabs, and lobsters, and because of the Belgian liking for raw, dried fish, some of the catch is strung over wires so that it will dry in the air.

Every year at the Belgian fishing ports there is a ceremony known as *The Blessing of The Sea*. On this Sunday, statues of the church saints are taken through the streets, followed by fishermen carrying nets and wearing oilskins and sou'westers. The fishermen and their families go to the seashore with

the priest, who, during a short service, sprinkles the sea with Holy Water, and asks God to protect the lives of the seamen and give them an abundant harvest during the coming year.

When the holiday season is over, most of the hotels and villas close, and the windows are boarded with shutters. Although some people visit the coast during winter week-ends and at Easter, most of the *digue* is left in solitude, until the season of summer gaiety comes round again the following year.

## V

## THE PLAIN OF FLANDERS

BEHIND the dunes stretches the flat plain of Flanders, criss-crossed by canals and long straight roads paved with cobbles and lined with rows of poplars. From the air, the countryside looks like an immense patchwork quilt, a study in fawns, yellows, and greens. Each farm and cottage has a patch of carefully tended vegetable garden, and in the fields are crops of wheat, rye, sugar-beet, potatoes, and maize. The houses, many of which back on to the canals or line the towpaths, are reached by little stone bridges, and the unfenced fields are often divided by ditches fringed with willows. This, together with the fact that most of the Flemish farms are small, makes ploughing by tractor impracticable.

The white farmhouses and outbuildings, with their orange-tiled roofs, are arranged round three sides of a cobbleéd courtyard. Although many farms are at the side of the road, others lie across the fields reached by narrow, unpaved tracks. The blue or green doors and window shutters of the farms and wayside inns are often striped with vertical lines of white paint, and even the old-fashioned wooden-wheeled farm wagons are painted in bright colours.

Part of Flanders, particularly the polder country from which the sea has been drained, is rich pasture land, and the meadows round the little farms support herds of fine Friesian cattle. Even if his land is mainly under cultivation, the Flemish

farmer may have one or two milking cows, a few pigs, and in the orchard, white rabbits, goats, and sheep, the two latter firmly tethered so that they will not wander and waste precious grazing ground. In Flanders, there is also an important poultry industry run on up-to-date methods, and so that the hens shall have as long a working day in winter as in summer, the big whitewashed hen houses are lit by electricity. The farmer, with the aid of special switches installed in his home, first of all dims the light in the poultry house in order that the hens can get to their perches, and then, when they have settled for the night, plunges the building into darkness. Some farmers have switches at the side of their beds, so that in the winter mornings they can turn on the lights without getting up. At night, the Belgian countryside is very dark; the cottage windows are firmly shuttered, and the light streaming forth from the hen houses helps to show the way.

In Flanders, as in many other parts of Belgium, the towns are sometimes linked by electric trams. A ride on a cross-country tram is one of the best ways of seeing the Belgian countryside, as the tracks run alongside the roads and through the centre of towns and villages. Flanders, like most of Belgium, is very flat, and for this reason the bicycle is a popular form of transport. As so many of the main roads are cobbled, there are usually special cycle tracks, one on each side of the road, or a single track for both lines of traffic. After the day's work is over, particularly in the industrial parts of Belgium, hundreds of bicycles stream along these tracks and, as the Belgians ride fast and furiously,

it is necessary, if you are a cyclist, to keep well in at the side, otherwise you will be deafened by the constant ringing of bicycle bells. The Belgians have light bicycles, but because they often have to ride over cobbles, their tyres are bigger and thicker than is usual. To help pay for the upkeep of the cycle tracks, everyone who owns a bicycle has to pay a yearly tax of ten shillings, and carry a small registration plaque (a different colour for each year), on their front wheel. High winds often sweep across the Flemish countryside, their speed and force increased by the extreme flatness of the plain. When these winds blow, it is almost impossible to cycle against them, and as the wind blows more often from the west, the poplars lining the roads and canals, and providing windbreaks round the farm-houses, are bent permanently towards the east.

The whole of the Flemish Plain is dotted with villages, farmhouses, and cottages, while here and there rise the roof-tops, spires, and towers of some famous old town. Furnes, with its narrow streets, noisy rattling trams, and cobbled Grand' Place surrounded by gabled brick houses, is typical of one of these towns. As a centre for the dairy produce of West Flanders, Furnes has come to be known as the "Queen of the Polders", but visitors more often associate the town with the yearly folklore event—the "Procession of the Penitents". No one really knows when this procession started; some say that it dates from the twelfth century, when Robert of Flanders, after escaping from shipwreck, gave to the first church he saw, St. Walburga's at Furnes, a fragment of wood which he claimed came from the Holy Cross. However, the second explanation



SAND YACHTING ALONG THE BELGIAN COASTLINE



COASTAL SAND DUNES



ATH: FOLKLORE FESTIVAL OF  
“THE MARRIAGE OF THE GIANTS

(See page 70)

which is linked with the Spanish occupation of the seventeenth century, is perhaps the more probable. Furnes at this time was a Spanish garrison town, and the procession is supposed to have been started by the people, as a means of pleading with their overlords against the outbreak of war between France and Spain. In the procession, which takes place in July, tableaux representing scenes from the Bible are acted in the streets, and as the "penitents", wearing black hooded cloaks and carrying heavy crosses, pass by, the people of Furnes kneel on the cobblestones in prayer.

Courtrai, in the south of West Flanders, is an important flax and linen centre. The wide river Lys, which flows through the town, is lined with warehouses, and is a useful means of transport for the barges and their loads of flax. Belgium is unable to grow all the flax she needs, and so has to import the remainder from Normandy in France, and from Holland. Flax must be soaked in water to soften the fibres, and in the past the *retting* process took place in the Lys. Nowadays, however, this is forbidden, as the continual retting of flax pollutes the river and spoils it for fishing. To-day, the flax is put in special cement tanks, and water is poured over it. After three days in the retting tanks, it is made into stooks and put in the fields to dry. The crop is harvested and dried in July and August, and although a few mills use artificial heat, drying by sun and air is preferable. When the flax is dry, it is put between rollers and lines of forked teeth, so that the fibre, which is outside, can be separated from the woody stem. Finally, to get rid of any small pieces of wood, it is winnowed, combed with

iron prongs to make the strands lie straight, and packed into bales.

During the First World War, thousands of British and Commonwealth soldiers lost their lives on the Plain of Flanders. Much of the fighting took place around Ypres, a town in the north-west corner, not far from the French frontier. The Germans, who were in possession of Ostend and Zeebrugge, fought bitterly in their efforts to obtain control of the French Channel ports, but the Allied line held firm. At the end of the war Ypres was in ruins, and of the immense Cloth Hall, once one of the greatest Gothic buildings in the West, scarcely a stone was left standing. Although it has taken many years of patient reconstruction, the Cloth Hall has been rebuilt, and the town, in spite of its new buildings, has kept the old style of Flemish architecture. The belfry, besides containing a War Museum, is also the starting point for an interesting folklore event. At this *Kattefeest*, which takes place during Lent, a man, dressed in the red and white costume of a jester, throws a stuffed, woolly cat to the crowds in the Grand' Place below. In the past, a living cat was thrown from the top of the belfry, and then afterwards burnt on a bonfire.

Both in and around Ypres are many war cemeteries, and in the town itself there is an impressive memorial dedicated to the officers and men of the British Commonwealth. The marble arch of the Menin Gate stretches across the roadway, and every evening traffic is stopped for a few minutes, while buglers sound the Last Post in memory of the Fallen.

## VI

## BRUGES

THE name Bruges (or Brugge as it is spelt in Flemish) comes from an old northern European word meaning "landing-stage". After the Romans had conquered the country, they built one of their series of fortifications on the banks of the Reie, at the place now known as the Burg. When in the ninth century Baudouin the Iron Arm became Count of Flanders, the old Roman fortifications had fallen into decay, and so, in order to protect the country from the Normans, he built a fortress and surrounded it with walls and moats. This was the beginning of Bruges, and although during the centuries much of the Burg has been destroyed, the present-day square still contains many interesting buildings. The oldest of these buildings is at the side of the town hall—the twelfth-century chapel of St. Basil, the lower part of the chapel of the Holy Blood.

At one time, Bruges, the greatest of the Hansa towns, was wealthier than London, and Flemish cloth was sought after by merchants from all over the western world. Much of the town's importance was due to the fact that, because many years ago the sea came up to Bruges, the town lay on the shortest route between England and Flanders. The burghers, determined to make Bruges the world's greatest wool market, built cloth halls, made good commercial laws, and manufactured material of faultless quality. The most impressive of these cloth

halls, the Waterhalle, stood in the Grand' Place on the site now occupied by the post office and governor's palace. The Reie came right up to the Waterhalle, and the wool and other cargoes were unloaded into the top storey of the cloth hall.

Through her trade, the town grew rich and powerful, and within the walls were many gilded palaces, the homes of merchant princes. Their houses were full of treasures, and their warehouses stored with costly bales: English and Scottish wool for the looms of Flanders, Norwegian furs, Italian silk, and precious stones and spices from the East. The merchants lent money to kings and princes, and lived themselves in almost royal luxury. During the long reign of Philip the Good, the last but one of the Burgundian Dukes, Bruges was the meeting place of artists from all over Europe. This was the period of Van Eyck and Memling, and there was no lack of wealthy patrons both at court and among the merchants.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Damme, three miles away, was the prosperous outer port of Bruges. Here, the river Zwin narrowed, and the cargoes of ocean-going ships were re-loaded on to barges before continuing their journey to Bruges. One of the cobbled streets contains a gabled house, now a museum, where Margaret of York stayed after her marriage, in the church of Notre Dame, to Charles the Bold. When the royal party went to Bruges, the English princess, followed by many of the ladies of her court riding white horses, was carried through the streets in a litter decorated with cloth of gold. The streets, too, were lavishly decorated with cloth of gold, silks and rare carpets.

During the feasting and celebrating, which continued for months, the palace fountains flowed with wine, and in the reservoirs which they filled, it was free to all. The court at Bruges became one of the most magnificent in Europe, but by the end of the Burgundian period, the glory of the once rich and powerful Bruges was passing. Wars, rebellions, and the silting up of the Zwin, all helped to drive the foreign merchants away. Antwerp, close at hand, had the advantage of being situated on a deep, navigable river, and was becoming increasingly important as a world port. Bruges was still queen of the arts, but when the channel of the Zwin, which joined this great city to the sea, became choked up with sand, her days of greatness, together with those of Damme, came to a close.

To-day, the town that has been called: “Bruges La Morte”—“Bruges the Dead City”, is one of the loveliest towns in Europe. The trams which used to clatter through the narrow streets have now been replaced by buses; there is a modern railway station approached by pleasant lawns and gardens, and a new ship canal cut through to Zeebrugge, once more gives the town access to the sea.

In spite of this consciousness of the present, Bruges still retains much of her medieval past. The streets, and the many canals winding through the town, are lined with tall, brick houses, their Flemish gables rising in steps and the red stone softened to a mellow orange through centuries of sun and rain. Many of the houses fringing the canals rise steeply out of the water, while others are perched on top of brick walls. Bruges is lovely at all seasons : in spring, when the sticky horse-chestnut buds break

into leaf, and the window-boxes and gardens are planted with daffodils, and in autumn, when the virginia creeper on the canal houses turns red, and the avenues of limes and chestnuts on the cobbled quaysides change from green to many shades, of orange, brown, and gold. When the sun shines, the houses with their "stepped" gables, the little stone bridges, the flowers in the window-boxes, the chestnut trees and weeping willows, are all reflected in the placid waters of the canal. At night as by day, Bruges is just as enchanting. During the tourist season the floodlit canals are a fairyland of light and, in the streets and squares, the old historic buildings are silhouetted against the sky.

Perhaps the best way of getting to know Bruges is to go round the canals in one of the little white-painted motor-boats. Some of the bridges are so low that it is necessary to duck when the boat passes underneath. During the last war, many canal bridges were destroyed, and when new ones were built those which divided to let shipping through were equipped with electrical devices. The children of Bruges are very grateful for these bridges and, when they are late for school, they always say that it is "the bridge" that has made them so.

One of the prettiest stretches of the canal is near the Gruuthuse, a fifteenth-century Palace now used as a folk museum. The canal here is part of the Reie, the river which once flowed into the estuary of the Zwin. The Reie, sometimes following the course of the old city wall, meanders through the town and is to be found in the most unexpected places. A cobbled courtyard leads from the Gruuthuse to the church of Notre Dame, and the view

from the little St. Boniface bridge is often painted by artists. This part of the canal, with its house built on a covered archway spanning the water, is the favourite haunt of swans. According to an old legend, the people of Bruges as one of their punishments for murdering Maximilian's counsellor Pieter Langhals — Peter the Longneck — were ordered to maintain for ever the swans on the canals of Bruges, so that when they saw these "birds with a long neck" it would remind them of the crime that had been done to their Duke's counsellor.

Maximilian was not popular with the citizens of Bruges; on one occasion, the burghers after refusing to give money for his wars, kept him prisoner for three months at a house in the Grand' Place. Maximilian was only released after he had knelt in the square and made a solemn promise to the people of Bruges that he would not punish them. When he was free, however, he soon forgot his promise; he gave more and more privileges to Antwerp, and two years after his release the town was sacked by German troops.

The church of Notre Dame which adjoins the Gruuthuse is one of the most beautiful in the Low Countries, and besides containing the richly decorated tombs of Charles the Bold and his daughter Mary of Burgundy, it has a white marble statue of the Virgin and Child sculptured by the famous Italian, Michelangelo. This statue, which was stolen by the Germans, was rediscovered after the Second World War in an Austrian salt mine.

The *béguinage*, reached over a three-arched bridge, is another of the much-painted corners of Bruges. The little whitewashed houses with their red roofs

and green doors are arranged round a tree-shaded quadrangle and, in the enclosure, numbers of fan-tailed pigeons strut up and down. The *béguinages*, which were started as far back as the twelfth century, are a kind of religious almshouses. The nuns; or *béguines* as they are called, take vows of poverty and obedience, but the vows are not binding and, if they wish, they may return to their families, marry, and lead a normal, everyday life. There are also *béguinages* at Ghent, Courtrai, Mechlin (Malines), Lierre, and many other Flemish towns. During the day, the *béguines* look after old people and the sick, washing, cleaning for them, and doing their shopping. In Belgium, it is quite common to see nuns riding bicycles and even light motor-cycles. During the summer months, particularly in the streets close to the *béguinage*, the women sit outside their houses, making the fine lace for which Bruges is famous.

A short distance from the *béguinage*, which is built on the banks of the Reie, the river widens into a lake called the Minnewater or Lac d'Amour. If, on your first visit to Bruges, you stand on the bridge which crosses the Lake of Love and wish, the wish according to an old legend will be sure to come true. In the Middle Ages, the lake was a busy inland port, and nobles, sailing on the canal between Bruges and Ghent, had their boats drawn along by horses on the canal bank. The entrance to this commercial basin was once defended by two huge towers, one of which, used in the past for storing gunpowder and weapons, can still be seen.

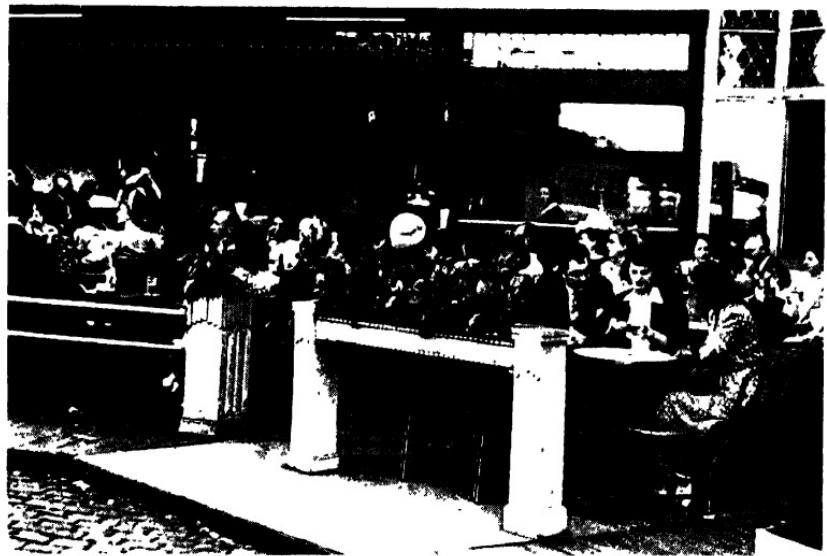
In the twelfth century, Thierry, Count of Flanders, brought back with him from the Holy Land some of what is said to be the blood of our



BRUGES: FLEMISH HOUSES BESIDE  
ONE OF THE CANALS



BRUGES: PROCESSION OF THE HOLY BLOOD



A PAVEMENT CAFÉ IN BRUSSELS

Lord, and around this relic there has grown up the Procession of the Holy Blood, which takes place every year in Bruges on the first Monday after 2nd May. The relic, which is kept in the chapel of the Holy Blood, is carried through the town in a gold shrine ornamented with precious jewels. On the occasion of Thierry's return from the Holy Land, the streets were carpeted with leaves and the houses decked with flowers. To-day, flags hang outside the houses, and the windows are filled with lighted candles. Most of the people in the procession belong to Bruges, and sometimes the costumes they wear have been handed down for generations. The procession moves slowly through the streets, and when the Holy Blood passes, the crowds lining the pavements kneel in prayer.

It is impossible to do justice to Bruges in one small chapter, just as it is impossible to see the town properly in a day. The many churches, enriched with canvases by the great Flemish artists, the Hans Memling paintings in St. John's Hospital, the magnificent oak roof of the aldermen's room in the town hall, and the museums with their priceless collections of furniture, manuscripts, and tapestries, all contribute to give Bruges the title of the "Pearl of Flanders".

A stroll through the town always seems to begin and end at the Grand' Place, where the belfry, rising high above the cloth hall, is a permanent reminder of the past power and wealth of this once great medieval city.

## VII

# GHENT

GHENT, a short train journey from Bruges, is another of Belgium's famous towns. The city is built on a hundred islands caused by the winding channels of three rivers—the Lys, the Live, and the Scheldt. Although Ghent, like Bruges, has many old buildings, there are also busy industrial suburbs and a port which, after Antwerp, is the most important in Belgium. A canal has been cut through Dutch territory linking the port with the estuary of the Scheldt, thus making it independent of Antwerp.

During the Middle Ages the people of Ghent were amongst the bravest in Belgium. At the top of the belfry there was a famous bell called "Roland", and the inscription engraved on its side—"Als mense luyd es storme int land" (When it is rung there is storm in the land) has come to life many times during the centuries. As in all the cities, there was continual strife between burghers and nobles, and when the people heard their bell ringing forth from the top of the city watchtower, they knew it was warning them of the approach of an army, or calling them to arms. It was no easy task to subdue the people of Flanders; as Philip the Fair was once told, "the Flemings are a proud folk and it is not good to ask them for money". However, victory was not always on the side of the townsfolk, and on the occasion of an uprising against the salt tax, the aldermen of Ghent, after being driven through the streets with halters round their necks,

were made to kiss the dust at the feet of their conquerors.

Fighting went on, not only amongst the nobles, but between the various towns. The Flemish wool industry was the cause of much of the rivalry; each town cared only for itself, and wanted to be richer than its neighbour. Ghent tried to ruin Ypres, and the men of Ghent once helped an English army to attack it. At other times the guildsmen of Bruges fought against those of Ghent, but whereas the wool trade of Bruges died with the silting up of the Zwin, that of Ghent has lived on. Through the foresight of one of her former citizens, who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, brought back from England the secret of the mechanical spinning and weaving of cotton, the town, as well as having woollen mills, is also an important centre for the cotton and linen industry.

Ghent has one of the finest castles in Europe, the past residence of the Counts of Flanders. This castle, with its many semicircular watchtowers built at intervals along the battlements, was a medieval stronghold. The walls bristle with arrow slits, and in places there are holes through which boiling oil was poured on the heads of the unfortunate attackers beneath. When, at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, the English King Edward III came to Ghent to proclaim himself King of France, he was received in one of the halls of the castle by Jacques van Artevelde, the captain of the town. For the people of Ghent this was a happy occasion, as in return for their promise of allegiance, Edward, nullifying the order of the French King, Philip, reopened the wool trade between England and

Flanders, and raised the ban on the import of English wool.

When the castle ceased to be used as the residence of the Flemish Counts, the Council of Flanders made it their headquarters, and in the Banqueting Hall passed judgment on all evildoers, ordering thieves to be hanged, heretics burned, and coiners drowned in hot oil. In the square in front of the castle, a pillar surmounted by the Flemish lion marks the site of the old scaffold.

To-day, as in the past, the fortress still dominates the town. From the castle, whose walls are washed by the waters of the Lys, buildings stretch in all directions, whilst huddled at its foot lie the twisting streets and red roofs of the old town. Out of this maze of roof tops rise the three famous towers of Ghent—St. Nicholas, the Belfry, and the Cathedral of St. Bavon. The belfry has had three “Rolands”; the last one finished in 1948, replaced the old “Triumphant Bell” which, after more than two hundred years of service, cracked at the beginning of the First World War, and can now be seen in a nearby square. On the topmost point of the belfry is a large copper dragon, and in the days before floodlighting this dragon, on special occasions, was illuminated by pots of flaming tar.

A short distance from the belfry is the Friday Market, the medieval heart of the city. Here, when “Roland” called them to arms, the men of Ghent would assemble behind the banners of their guilds, and here, also, the people gathered to welcome their overlord or to watch the tournaments of his knights. In the centre of the market-place is a statue of Jacques van Artevelde, and not far from this statue

stands the Burgundian gun "Mad Meg", so named because of the great noise it used to make when firing.

Ghent, like Bruges, is a city of quays and waterways, and on the Quay of Herbs (Graslei) are some of the town's finest buildings. During the Middle Ages, the Graslei was the inner port of Ghent, and many of the houses have lofts and cellars which were used for storage purposes. The brick houses with their typical "stepped" gables and small leaded window-panes, are ornamented with raised designs in stone, while the house of the ancient corporation of free boatmen is decorated with the bass relief of a medieval warship. Between the house of the corn measurers and the old granary is the custom-house, so small and narrow that it almost seems as if the houses on either side are trying to squeeze it out of existence. The thirteenth-century granary, a grim black building with the strong rounded arches of the period, was used for storing the city toll of a third of all the grain that came up the river.

Ghent has often been called the "City of Flowers", and in the outlying nursery gardens and hothouses large quantities of flowers are cultivated. A gigantic flower show held once every five years attracts thousands of visitors, and the flower growers of Ghent, who export their blooms to every corner of the globe, have achieved a world-wide reputation.

## VIII

### ANTWERP—THE GATEWAY TO EUROPE

ANTWERP, like Bruges and Ghent, is very old. It is said that, hundreds of years ago, there was an eighteen-foot giant living on the banks of the Scheldt who used to levy a toll on every ship that came up the river. If the captain refused to give him money, the giant would cut off one of his hands and throw it into the river. In Flemish, the word *werpen* means “to throw”, and so the place where the giant lived was called *Hand-werpen*, which became in course of time the Flemish Antwerpen. You may not believe this story, but at least two of the squares contain statues of a man called Brabo, a Roman soldier, who is supposed to have killed the giant. The city also preserves the rib of a whale which in the Middle Ages was thought to be that of the giant Druon.

Antwerp is fifty miles from the sea, but for much of this distance the wide estuary flows through Dutch territory. When the power of Bruges grew less, Antwerp took its place in the world of commerce and art and, by the end of the sixteenth century, it was one of the world's greatest ports. Unfortunately, the prosperity of Antwerp was not continuous; in the middle of the following century, after the northern provinces had broken away, the Dutch, in order to encourage the growth of Amsterdam, obtained complete control of the Scheldt by the Treaty of Münster in 1648. They closed the river and, to prevent ships sailing to

Antwerp, built forts on the banks. Thus for nearly two hundred years the trade of Antwerp was ruined, and not until the French Revolutionaries invaded Belgium was the Scheldt declared a free port, open to all. Napoleon pulled down the Dutch forts and, in preparation for his proposed invasion of England, enlarged the port and built a naval arsenal. During the Second World War much of Antwerp was destroyed by rocket attacks, and thousands of her citizens killed.

To-day, Antwerp has recovered from the devastation of the war years, and the harbour is crowded with shipping from all parts of the world. The low-lying shores of the Scheldt are lined with shipyards, dry-docks, quays, and warehouses, and as well as being the world's most important centre for the cutting and polishing of diamonds, Antwerp has a wool exchange, and many iron foundries and engineering shops. Under-river tunnels have been constructed for cars and pedestrians, and a network of canals and railway lines links the port with the rest of Europe.

Although Antwerp is a busy commercial port, it has many buildings of historic interest. On the waterfront, the Steen Museum, with its rounded turrets, is all that remains of the old fortress of Antwerp. During the Inquisition, the castle was used as a prison, and inside the building there is a chapel where prisoners heard their last Mass before being executed. Another of Antwerp's great buildings is the Cathedral, which contains paintings by the artist Rubens who lived in Antwerp for many years. This Gothic building, like hundreds of others in Belgium, is so elaborate that its construction

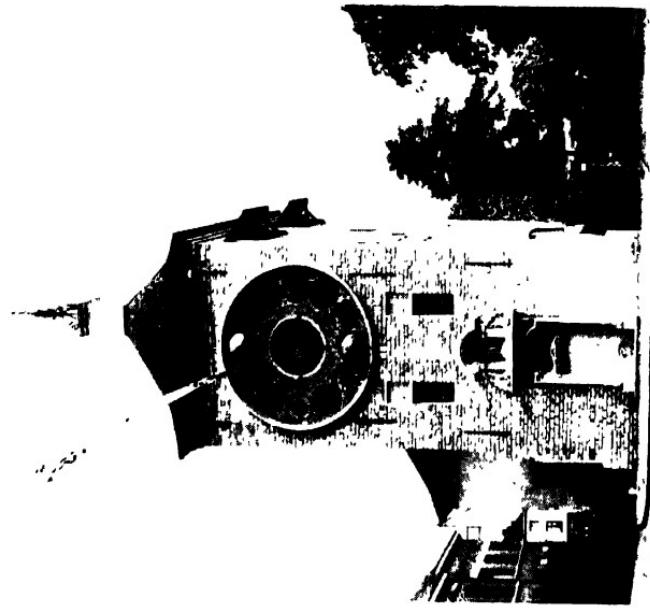
was spread over more than two centuries. The work, which was begun in the middle of the fourteenth century, passed from father to son, and when one architect died another would take over the plans, altering them to suit his own taste and the changing styles in architecture. The original plan had twin towers, but as the second tower was never finished, the Cathedral has a rather top-heavy appearance. During the Religious Wars, the Cathedral, together with many of the other churches, was badly damaged by the Calvinists, who used chisels and whitewash in their work of destruction. Statues prised from their niches were smashed to pieces, and valuable stained glass removed from the windows. The devout Catholics saved what they could from the fury of the Calvinists, and in the harbour the ships were filled with statues and other valuables taken from the churches.

One of the best ways of getting to know more about sixteenth-century Antwerp is to visit the Plantin-Moretus house which was once the home of a printer called Plantin. The business, which later took the name of Plantin's son-in-law Moretus, continued through seven generations, and the house, with its Rubens paintings, tapestries, and old furniture, gives a clear picture of what life was like in the home of a sixteenth-century Flemish merchant. Everything is so real that in the printing rooms one cannot help feeling that work has just finished for the day—there are old sixteenth-century presses, ancient proof sheets, and specimens of books printed by the famous Plantin Press.



THE LION MONUMENT, WATERLOO

*See page 50!*



LIERRE: THE ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK



BRUSSELS: THE GRAND PLACE WITH  
TOWN HALL AND GUILD HOUSES

## IX

# BRUSSELS

**BRUSSELS**, the capital of Belgium, is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. Historians believe that the first settlement was on an islet in the marshes of the river Senne. In the past, the Senne, a muddy evil-smelling river which helped to spread plagues and epidemics, flowed through the city, but in the nineteenth century modern boulevards were constructed, and nowadays the river flows underneath the roadway.

Since medieval times, Brussels, because of its position on the main highway between Bruges and Cologne, has been an important trading centre. As early as the fifteenth century it was famous for its luxury trade, and goods like lace, tapestry, jewellery, ornamental leather work, and fine gloves are still manufactured there. To-day, in addition to being one of Europe's shopping centres, Brussels has iron and brass foundries, engineering works, and many other industries. Although the capital does not stand on an important river, trade is carried on through a network of canals and railways which connect it with the main cities, the port of Antwerp, and the North Sea.

Brussels is not only a centre of industry and commerce, it is also a cultural centre. The museums and art galleries contain some of the finest examples of both the Flemish and Dutch schools, and there are many concerts of classical music.

Like most European capitals, Brussels is a mixture

of old and new, and the heart of old Brussels is the Grand' Place, a medieval square surrounded by guild houses with unusual ornamented gables. One of these gables is shaped like the stern of a sailing ship, while others are decorated with statues. But the most impressive building in the Grand' Place is the town hall, the front of which is a mass of statuettes. Its high slate roof is pierced by four rows of dormer windows, and on top of the lofty spire there is a gilded figure of the Archangel Michael, the patron saint of Brussels. Facing the town hall on the other side of the square is the Maison du Roi, which now houses a museum, while at the other corner, in a small wall niche, there is a bronze statue of Everard t' Serclaes, a former Brussels hero who rallied the people and led them against the occupying troops of Louis of Male. Many people believe that if they touch the arm of Everard t' Serclaes or the head of his dog, it will bring them luck, and so, through constant rubbing, these parts of the shrine gleam like burnished gold.

Many of the sights are within easy walking distance of the Grand' Place: the Palace with its sentry boxes and sunken gardens, the Houses of Parliament which face the Palace at the opposite end of the public Parc Royal, the tomb of the Belgian Unknown Warrior guarded by two bronze lions, and the Palais de Justice, where the Law Courts sit. This immense building, with its domes and series of columns reminiscent of the temples of ancient Babylon, is built on top of what was once known as Gallows Hill, the former site of the city's gallows.

A short distance from the Law Courts, reached by one of the many twisting side streets, is the

quarter of the "Marolles". This part of Brussels, with its narrow alleyways and open-air street markets, is very different from the fashionable boulevards. The hardworking "Marolliens", whose dialect is a mixture of French and Flemish, have the generosity and sharp wit of the London cockney. In the squares, and at the side of the streets, are stalls of cockles and mussels, while buckets of fat edible snails cook on top of charcoal braziers. In this area of Brussels, on the square of the Place du Jeu de Ball, there is an unusual kind of open-air market. The goods spread out on the cobblestones, vary from piles of rags and battered straw hats to rusty tools and door keys. However, in spite of the nature of the merchandise, there is always someone to buy, and business in the "flea-market" is brisk, as well as being accompanied by much good-natured raillery.

Close to Brussels, on the south and west, is the forest of Soignes, a remnant of the dense forest that once covered the province of Brabant. The part of the forest nearest the town is called the Bois de la Cambre, and the many paths through the beech and oak woods are ideal for walking or riding.

Within the city itself there are many small parks and gardens, and in one of these gardens, on the children's playground, there is a statue of Peter Pan. This statue, a copy of the Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, was given by the sculptor, Sir George Frampton, as a sign of friendship between the children of London and the children of Brussels. Another charming little square is the Petit Sablon, which is surrounded by an iron-work railing supporting numbers of bronze figures, each of which

represents a medieval guild. The square also contains a monument to the Counts Egmont and Horn. In the middle of the sixteenth century, these patriots, who had tried to free their country from the tyranny of Philip II, were executed by order of the Duke of Alva, in front of the Maison du Roi.

Many places just outside Brussels can be reached by tram. The Belgian Congo museum, which is situated in the former royal hunting ground of the Park of Tervueren, contains a varied and interesting collection from the Congo, while Erasmus House in the suburb of Anderlecht, is a museum devoted to the life and work of this great philosopher who lived in Brussels for many years. Waterloo can also be reached by tram, and the best way of seeing the battlefield is to climb to the top of the lion monument. From the "Waterloo Lion", which crowns the summit of a specially constructed turf pyramid, the flat plain with its farms and hamlets stretches into the distance.

Farther afield, but within reach of the capital, are two famous old cities—Louvain, with its town hall and ancient university, and Malines, where Margaret of Austria ruled the Low Countries for her father, Maximilian. This Austrian princess was highly accomplished, and her court, one of the most brilliant in Europe. To Sir Thomas Boleyn, whose daughter, Anne, was at the court, she wrote: "I find that she has such good manners and is such a pleasant companion for her years, that I am more indebted to you for having sent her than you are to me."

Malines, with its cathedral of St. Rombold, is the seat of the Archbishop of Belgium. There is an

old story which tells how once, when the moon was shining brightly through the tower, the people thought there was a fire, and tried to put it out with water. Even if there is no truth in the story, the people of Malines are sometimes called "moon-quenchers", and the author, when he wrote the following poem, may also have had this story in mind.

Brussels rejoices in noblemen, Antwerp in money,  
Ghent in halters, Bruges in pretty girls,  
Louvain in learned men, and Malines in fools.

Wandering among the towns, and in the countryside of Flanders and Brabant, gives one the impression that the whole of Belgium is a level plain, but beyond the forest of Soignes, the small fields, the formal rows of trees, and the long, straight roads disappear, and in their place appears the undulating tableland of the Ardennes, with its waterfalls, grottoes and pine forests.

## X

### THE ARDENNES

THE countryside of the Ardennes in the south consists mainly of woodland alternating with rich pastures, and is very different from the rest of Belgium. Even the scattered villages are unlike those of the northern plain; they nestle in the hollows surrounded by trees, or in clearings on the thickly wooded knolls. The grey bulbous spire of the church rises above the cluster of slate roofs, and many of the whitewashed houses have window-boxes and hanging baskets of flowers. Although most houses have two pumps over the sink, one for well water and one for rain water, there is usually a pump at the side of the street, and sometimes a communal shed containing troughs, where the women can do their washing.

Many of the farms of southern Belgium have impressive wrought-iron gates flanked by stone pillars. The house and outbuildings are built round three sides of an interior courtyard, and often the cows and other animals are shut up for the night in barns attached to the side of the house. In the Ardennes, as in other parts of Belgium, the women, their hair tied up in scarves and with heavy clogs on their feet, work in the fields alongside their menfolk.

The Ardennes tableland is watered by many rivers and streams. The valley of the Semois is a favourite holiday area, and the highway follows the river, or climbs between pine plantations and

woods of oak, hazel, beech, and silver birch. The road is so steep that in places it coils and loops like the mountain roads of Switzerland and Italy. The distant view is of tier upon tier of wooded hills, with an occasional glimpse through the trees of the valley and winding river far below. The tobacco, for which this area is noted, is cultivated in clearings along the river bank. After the crop has been cut, it is put in wooden sheds to dry, and in September the air is filled with the scent of the drying leaves. The sheds, which are partly open to the air, have corrugated iron roofs, and three or four rows of shelves to which the tobacco stalks are nailed.

At Botassart, in the Semois valley, there is a large, partly tree-covered rock known as the Giant's Tomb. Although it is thought that the strange collection of stones along the Vallée des Tombes may have been part of a Roman road, the legend gives another reason for their existence. The big stones were once knights; the smaller ones their pages, and when these nobles unwisely held a tournament on a religious fast day, they were confronted with a divine apparition and turned into stone.

The ruined stone fortress of Bouillon, perched high above the winding Semois, was the castle of the heroic Godfrey de Bouillon, leader of the first Crusade. The cobbled courtyards, and the grey walls and battlements are overgrown with weeds, but enough remains to show that Bouillon once occupied one of the most strategic sites in the Ardennes.

The Lesse, like the Semois, is a tributary of the Meuse. The river rushes in from the south through

a narrow gorge, and not far from Dinant, on the topmost point of a steep rock overhanging the river, is the castle of Walzin.

The Ardennes are honeycombed with grottoes, and at Han the river disappears underground. During its journey inside the mountain, the Lesse has continually changed course, and in the many winding passages which were once the bed of the river, stalactites and stalagmites have formed. Accompanied by a guide, parties of tourists are led through the underground passages and caverns, and although the caves are wired with electricity, the men who first discovered them had to carry torches, and blaze their way with a trail of flour. The present course of the Lesse is out of sight for most of the two-hour walk through the caves, but it reappears in the *Salle du Styx*, after sixteen hours underground. Although the atmosphere is cold and damp, and moisture drips from the roof, the *Salle d'Armes*, which is under the summit of the mountain, has a café where refreshments and hot drinks are served. The largest hall in the grotto is called the *Salle du Dome*. Here, for a few minutes, the cave is plunged in darkness, and to show its height, a man, torch in hand, runs down a slippery pathway of rock from the top of the immense cavern to the river level. Some of the grey rock is studded with an unusual type of stone, which, when the light shines on it, sparkles like diamonds. The caves are full of unusual rock structures, and the formation reflected in the waters of an underground lake close to the *Salle du Dome*, resembles the pipes of an organ. The exit from the caves is by boat, and when the Lesse finally comes into the open, it



A HOUSE IN THE ARDENNES



BOTASSART, IN THE ARDENNES: THE GIANT'S TOMB

has taken twenty-four hours to flow through the mountain.

During the summer, the Ardennes are visited by many foreign as well as Belgian tourists. The health resort of Spa has been famous for centuries, and the Duke of Wellington, Disraeli, and Peter the Great are among those who have "taken the waters". St. Hubert, which is situated in the midst of pinewoods, like many other places in the Ardennes, is an ideal centre both for walking and for shooting wild boar. St. Hubert is called after a young prince who later became a famous Belgian saint—the "Apostle of the Ardennes". In his youth, this prince was wicked and irreverent, always hunting on church fast days. One Good Friday, when he was out in the forest, he suddenly came face to face with a stag which had a crucifix growing between its antlers. Feeling that this apparition had been sent from Heaven to warn him of the danger he was in, the prince gave up hunting, renounced his title and wealth, and became a monk.

On the eastern fringe of the Ardennes, close to the German frontier, there is a plateau of marsh and stunted forests. This plateau, which is called the *Hautes Fagnes*, is the highest point in Belgium; here winters are severe, and in summer the heather and forest growth often catches fire. Although there are a few scattered farms and villages, little agriculture is possible, and the barren countryside is a great contrast to the fertile valleys of the Ardennes.

## THE TOWNS OF THE MEUSE

THE Meuse has been important to Belgium for centuries. Even in Roman times it was one of the main highways from Cologne to the sea. At Namur, the river, after flowing into the country from northern France, turns north-east, passes Liège, and continues its journey across Belgium, finally ending in Holland, where its name is changed to the Maas. The Meuse, like the other rivers of the Ardennes, is rich in history; the valleys are often dominated by ruined castles, and along its banks, or deep in the forests, are many ancient monasteries and abbeys. In places, the river is enclosed by steep, wooded slopes which rise sheer out of the water, and sometimes the banks are broken by ravines, and rocky pinnacles of limestone.

A series of canals in Belgium, Holland, and France enables the Meuse to be navigable for much of its journey, and along its busy watercourse plys a continual stream of tugs, freighters, and barges. The bargee's wife makes her floating home as attractive as possible. The wheelhouse is brightly painted and lined with pots of plants, with sometimes a bird in a cage hooked on to the side. Great trouble is taken to keep the barge clean and tidy, and in the morning, the bargee's wife is as busy as any housewife. The decks and covered hatches must be scrubbed, and buckets of water hauled up over the side for the daily washing. The banks of the Meuse are lined with villages and towns, and when

'there is shopping to be done, the bargee ties up his boat to the side and smokes a pipe, while his wife tramps across the meadows to fetch the stores. Although we may envy them their open-air life, there are many drawbacks. In winter, the river is often fogbound, and the barges slippery with ice. When the children are of school age, they have to go to one of the special boarding schools, where, in addition to the usual subjects, they are taught about life on the river and the work of barges. This means, of course, that they only see their parents during school holidays and on the few occasions when the barge passes through their town.

In summer, cabin cruisers, yachts, canoes, and rowing boats join the procession of barges; the banks are crowded with anglers, and the river full of swimmers, water skiers, and aquaplane enthusiasts. The cobbled towpaths are lined with open-air cafés, and the riverside cottages, many of which are painted in pastel shades of blue and green, take in guests for the short holiday season. The banks of the Meuse are ideal for camping, and tents of every size and description are to be found in the patches of open meadow beside the river.

Close to the town of Dinant, the route alongside the Meuse passes by a tall, limestone rock detached from the mountain on the opposite side of the road. This needle-like pinnacle is known as the Bayard Rock, and from it, according to the legend, the mythological horse, Bayard, leapt into the river, carrying to safety the four sons of the heathen Aymon who were fleeing before the Cross of Charlemagne. It is thought that the rock was

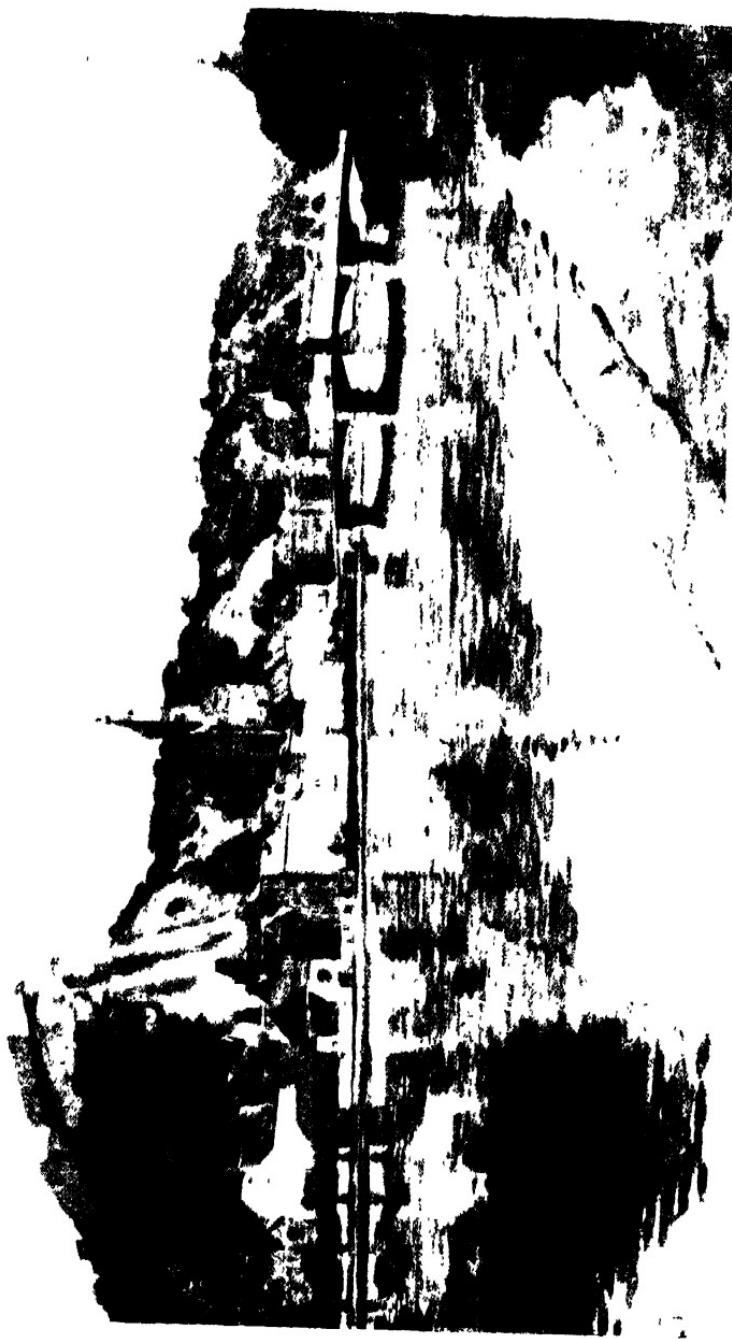
separated from the main part of the mountain by the armies of Louis XIV. The usual route by the Meuse was flooded, and there was a baggage train of over a thousand vehicles, most of which contained loot from the captured towns.

Dinant has had an endless history of war, fire, and siege. In 1466, it was destroyed and burnt to the ground by the Duke of Burgundy, and afterwards, on his orders, eight hundred of the town's leading citizens were bound back to back and thrown into the Meuse. Even in modern times, Dinant has undergone great suffering. During two world wars the town has been pillaged and burnt, and many of her citizens shot or deported.

In a corner of the Grand' Place, close to the church of Notre Dame, a steep flight of steps leads to the citadel. There was a fortified castle on the rock above Dinant in the eleventh century, but over the years the citadel has been destroyed and rebuilt several times.

Dinant is in the area of underground caves, and those of Mont Fat were originally formed by the Meuse which has changed its course during the centuries, and now winds its way through the valley many feet below. These caves were first inhabited by prehistoric man, and skeletons have been found which show that animals like hyenas and bears once frequented the Ardennes. Often, too, in time of war, and during enemy bombardments, the inhabitants of Dinant have taken refuge in the grottoes. A spiral staircase leads from the inside of the cave through the roof to the top of the mountain, finally linking up with one of the paths to the citadel.

DINANT





There are many ways of reaching Namur, which is about fifteen miles from Dinant. Cyclists and walkers can use the towpath, and although, because of the six locks, it takes longer on a river steamer than by car or train, it is one of the prettiest stretches on the river, and well worth the boat journey.

A short distance from Dinant is the ruined castle of Crève-coeur. When the French King, Henry II, besieged the castle and massacred its garrison, three noble women, to avoid capture, threw themselves from a high window into the Meuse. Even to this day, the rocks below the castle battlements where they met their death, are said to be haunted by wailing ghosts.

At the busy industrial town of Namur, famous for its cutlery, the Meuse receives its chief tributary, the Sambre, which flowing in from the west almost doubles its volume. Namur, like Dinant, has a citadel crowning its highest promontory, and from earliest times battles have been fought on the hills above the junction of the rivers. The people of Namur were so often defeated that they became expert at entertaining their victors. Louis XIV, after he had captured the city, enjoyed himself so much that he stayed for several weeks. One of the favourite forms of entertainment was fighting on stilts, a sport which usually took place in the Grand' Place. The young men, who could fight only with their elbows, or trip each other up with the stilts, were divided into companies. As the tournament advanced, there were many casualties; if a man were lucky, he might escape with a broken limb, but unfortunately, a fall on the cobblestones often

ended in death. There are various theories as to why the Namurois used stilts. One explanation is that the Meuse often flooded its banks, making the ground boggy, but the following story gives an entirely different reason. A former ruler of Namur, to punish the people for rising against him, besieged the city so successfully that, before long, the inhabitants were on the verge of starvation. The city aldermen tried to plead for mercy, but their lord refused to see anyone, saying that he would not give them audience, whether they came on foot, or by horse, carriage or boat. The aldermen, however, devised the idea of sending their deputation on stilts, and when the lord of Namur saw the ungainly figures striding over the ground towards him, he was so amused that he forgave the townspeople and lifted the siege.

Four miles beyond Namur, on the way to Liège, the sides of the Meuse are exceptionally steep and rocky. Here, at a place called Marche-les-Dames, King Albert I, who often went rock climbing alone, met his death by falling from one of the crags.

Towards Liège, the valley becomes very industrialised. Truck lines run from the hills to the tow-paths, and at the many small landing stages cargoes like quarried stone, coal, and pottery clay, are loaded straight on to the barges.

Like Dinant and Namur, Liège has suffered during both world wars. In the First World War, the heroic defenders of the girdle of forts surrounding the city stemmed the German advance, enabling France to reorganise her army, and Britain to send over an expeditionary force. In 1940, as in 1914, the Liège system of forts guarding the passage

of the Meuse put up a strong resistance, but, owing to the fierce onslaught of the enemy, who used tanks and waves of dive bombers, the Belgians were forced to fall back from the river. Unfortunately, not only were a number of the Meuse bridges left standing, leaving the way open for enemy infantry and tank formations, but many of those over the Albert Canal remained intact, so that troops defending the line along the canal from Liège to Antwerp also had to withdraw from their positions.

The rich coal-mines in the valley of the Meuse have made Liège the chief manufacturing centre in Belgium. Since medieval times the city has been one of the arsenals of Europe, and to-day it is still famous for the manufacture of guns and firearms. But Liège is not only a city of slag heaps, blast furnaces, and engineering workshops. It is a university town with many art treasures in its museum, and it is the seat of a bishop. Up to the end of the eighteenth century the city was an independent principality, ruled over by a long line of bishop-princes. Their palace, close to the heart of the city, its courts surrounded by sculptured colonnades, is one of the finest civic buildings in Belgium.

## XII

# BELGIAN FESTIVALS

FOR Belgian children, the most important winter festival is 6th December, the anniversary of the birth of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas arrives in Belgium in many different ways; at the seaside by boat, and at Bruges sailing by steamer up the canal from Zeebrugge. For some reason, whenever his arrival by *boat* is mentioned, he is always said to have come from Spain.

“Look there comes the steamer from Spain again” goes the first line of a song that the children of Bruges sing when they greet the Saint at the harbour. St. Nicholas’s arrival into Brussels is a great deal more elaborate. One year he flew in by helicopter, landing on the big square in front of the Palais de Justice. Unfortunately, in the towns, the season of St. Nicholas is becoming more and more commercialised. The shops regard it as good advertisement, and the big stores who have a St. Nicholas of their own, escort him through the streets with bands playing and with lorries piled high with toys from their counters.

Weeks before St. Nicholas Day, the shops are decorated with chocolate shapes filled with white sugar cream. There are always animals, clocks, and little children, with, of course, many figures of the good St. Nicholas. On the Eve of St. Nicholas there is great excitement in Belgian families. During the night, the children believe that the Saint rides through the sky and over the fields mounted on a

donkey, his basket filled with presents. The children, particularly those who live in the country, fill their shoes, or perhaps a basket, with hay, turnips, carrots, sugar, or potatoes for the donkey of St. Nicholas, and place them near the chimney of their bedroom, so that, when St. Nicholas comes to the house, he may find something for his donkey to eat, and in return leave presents. Sometimes, the children put plates for their presents, and a drink or cigar for St. Nicholas. Next morning, they wake early and jump out of bed to see what has been left them during the night. As well as toys, there are always chocolates, fruit and crisp biscuits called *speculoos*. Like the chocolates, the *speculoos* are made in many different shapes, the most common shape being that of St. Nicholas. In the bakers' shops, the *speculoos* vary in size from a few inches to the height of a man. These large *speculoos* have a layer of thin cardboard attached to the back, so that when they are sent as presents, the biscuit will not break.

As 6th December is during term-time, St. Nicholas visits the schools. Although like the English Father Christmas, he has white hair and a long white beard, he carries a cross, wears a red mitre on his head, and a long gown like a Bishop. St. Nicholas questions the children about their behaviour, and he always knows who has not been working hard. He is accompanied by a Moorish page carrying a whip and an empty sack, and those who have not behaved themselves during the year are told that they may be popped into it and taken away. At each classroom the arrival of the visitors is announced by the ringing of a bell, but before

any presents are given out, the children sing to St. Nicholas or recite poems. Here are two songs which are popular all over Belgium during the season of St. Nicholas. You will notice that the first one is written in Flemish and the second in French.

Sint' Niklaas,  
Nobele Sint' Niklaas!  
Werp iets in myn Schoentje  
Een Appeltje of een Citroentje!

This means in English: "Noble Saint Nicholas, please throw into my shoe a little apple or a little lemon".

And the French song goes like this:

O Grand Saint Nicolas, patron des écoliers,  
Apportez du bonbon tout plein mon p'tit panier.  
J'ai toujours été sag' comm' un petit mouton.  
Ej j'ai bien travaillé pour avoir ce bonbon.  
Venez, venez, Saint Nicolas; venez, venez Saint Nicolas.  
Venez, venez Saint Nicolas, tra-la-la!

Oh great Saint Nicholas, patron of schoolchildren,  
Bring sweets to fill my little basket.  
I have been as good as a little lamb  
And I have worked hard for those sweets.  
Come, come Saint Nicholas; come, come Saint Nicholas.  
Come, come Saint Nicholas, tra-la-la!

As you can see, St. Nicholas is very like Father Christmas. Children write letters to him, visit him with their parents, and are told that, if they are naughty, he will not bring them presents. In fact, the little Moorish page (who is called Black Peter), always carries a whip to chastise naughty children, but I have never heard of a Belgian boy or girl who has ever received a whipping!

Christmas in Belgium is not kept in the same

way as in England. There are special services in church, but few parties, and no plum pudding and mince pies. Nowadays, however, particularly since the war, the shops and homes are often decorated with Christmas trees, and many people send each other Christmas cards—sometimes English ones. In practically every shop window, the Crib forms the centrepiece of the decorations, and in the evenings in many towns, street loudspeakers relay the tunes of old Flemish and French carols and religious songs. Although there are no iced cakes, the pastry shops are full of what the Belgians call "Christmas Logs". These logs, which are rather like chocolate rolls, are filled with butter cream, and decorated with flowers and holly of sugar or marzipan. In some parts of Belgium, particularly Flanders, the Archangel Gabriel takes the place of St. Nicholas, and on Christmas morning the children often have a special kind of sugary bun for breakfast called an *engelskoek* or angel's cake. They are told that this cake has been left them during the night by the Archangel Gabriel. As well as their *engelskoek*, the children receive the toys and sweets that the others have had for the feast of St. Nicholas.

On New Year's Eve there is much celebrating in Belgian homes. Pancakes or waffles are eaten and, at midnight, the New Year is toasted with wine or beer. On New Year's Day, most Belgian children visit their Godparents, taking with them a New Year letter and a gingerbread cake in the shape of a heart. These "hearts" can still be seen in the shops, but the custom is gradually dying out, and instead, the Godparents may receive boxes of *pralines*, the delicious home-made Continental

chocolates. The New Year letter, however, is still very important. For weeks beforehand, at home and at school, this letter is practised, and often it has to be written many times before it is good enough to take to the Godparents. The letter, usually written on special paper which may have a border decorated with cut-out figures of birds, animals, or flowers, has to be particularly neat, as the Godparents often keep the letters from year to year to see if their Godchildren are improving in their school work. These letters are a kind of New Year Resolution, and in them the children thank their Godparents for all they have done during the past year, and promise to work hard at school and obey their parents and teachers.

On the Day of Epiphany, 6th January, the anniversary of the coming of the Wise Men to see Christ at Bethlehem, parties are often held, particularly in the Flemish part of Belgium. For this feast, a special kind of cake is made, which, before it is baked, has a small bean dropped into the mixture. When the cake is cut, the finder of the bean who is "King" for the evening, has the privilege of choosing a "Queen" to share his honours. The "King of the Bean" and his consort receive presents from the hostess of the party, and then for the rest of the evening everyone makes merry; there are games and competitions, and plenty of food and drink. The custom of the Epiphany Cake is very popular with young people but, unfortunately, like so many old customs, it is not nearly as important to-day as it was in the past.

There are many religious festivals in Belgium, but Easter, both for children and adults, is one of

the most important. During Mass on Maundy Thursday, when the congregation are remembering the beginning of Christ's Passion, all music finishes, and the church bells stop ringing. This, the children are told, is because from belfries throughout the country the bells are flying away to Rome. On Easter Saturday, the children are eager to go to Mass, because during the service the bells ring out once more, and as they return to their belfries, chocolate clocks and eggs are supposed to drop from Heaven. As you can imagine, after the service, all the young people hurry home to see if anything has fallen into their gardens, and, hidden away under stones and bushes, they will be sure to find a number of chocolate clocks and Easter eggs. Perhaps you can guess why so many parents stay at home during Easter Mass !

In their first year at school, that is when they are between six and seven, Belgian children go to their Première Communion which also takes place about Easter time. Most children have new clothes for their First Communion, the little girls wearing long white frocks which have been specially made for the event. Afterwards, there may be a feast at which the children receive small presents from their Godparents—a Cross or the picture of a Saint. Sometimes all the children in the class go to their First Communion together, and if there is a chapel, the ceremony may take place at school.

Similar to the First Communion, but of much greater importance, is the Solemn Communion which takes place in Belgium when the children are eleven or twelve years old. This religious festival costs the parents a great deal of money, and many

people start saving up for it as soon as a child is born. The children receive much preparation, and for two years beforehand, have special weekly Catechism lessons. The Solemn Communion is held also about Easter, and even if the parents were unable to buy new clothes for their Children's First Communion, they are sure to have them for this day. A boy's clothes are not much trouble, but a great deal of thought is given to seeing that a girl looks well. Her long dress, veil, shoes, and stockings are all white, and on her head she usually wears a crown of white flowers.

Mass is early, at seven or eight in the morning, and for this event cars are hired in which to go to church. Everyone returns to church for High Mass at about ten and, after the service, there is a feast to which the Godparents and relations are invited. At the end of the meal there is usually ice-cream in the form of a lamb. The people invited to the feast give presents, and whereas those given at the First Communion were only small, the presents on this occasion may be quite expensive: a gold bracelet for a girl, or a watch for a boy. During that week, or after the church service, the children are taken to a photographer, so that there will always be a record of this solemn event. The children are confirmed on the Monday, the day after their first Solemn Communion, and as there is no school on this day, they visit their relations and nearest friends. In the country, however, Confirmation only takes place every four years, when the Bishop comes specially for the occasion.

## XIII

# GIANTS

GIANTS are a characteristic feature of Belgian folklore and the first giants, which paraded in the early religious processions, appeared at the beginning of the fifteenth century. They often represented David and Goliath, and some of the old giants are particularly noted for their magnificence. For instance, the giant of Antwerp, Druon Antigon, which is said to have been designed by the court painter to the Emperor Charles V, is an immense hollow statue made of gilded and carved wood. A man hidden on a platform between the shoulders, swings its head and hails the crowd.

In many towns the giants "marry" and have children, and in some cities, like Brussels, there are as many as thirteen official giants. Even if a town has inherited giants from the past, usually it is only the face that has survived the ravages of the years, and new bodies and garments have had to be added from time to time. The bodies of the old giants are made of a light willow framework, while the head and hands are of wood or cardboard. Willow, however, breaks easily when dry, and some of the modern giants are made of aluminium.

A new giant is considered very exciting; the Hélléchsman of Arlon, which is over fifteen feet high, is mounted on wheels and manœuvred by three men hidden inside. This giant opens and shuts its mouth, and, with the aid of a speaker and microphones fixed inside the stomach, sings old songs and talks to the crowd.

As you can see, the life of these giants is almost a human one. They fall in love, marry, have children, and are not always happy. They have enemies too; mites, mice, and last but not least men, men like the Emperor Joseph II who forbade the people to carry giants in their processions. Like humans, the giants also die. Some were destroyed during the French occupation, others under wartime bombardment, while the two giants of the little town of St. Hubert in the Ardennes were burned by the Germans. During the two world wars, when dress material was almost unobtainable, some of the Belgian giants died a rather ignominious death. When they were found, only the heads and frameworks remained; the clothes in which they were dressed had vanished into thin air.

Although some of the old giants are not often seen nowadays, the giants of Ath, which have been famous for centuries, are still paraded through the streets on the fourth Saturday in August—the annual “Marriage of the Giants”. Goliath, a gigantic figure in helmet and breastplate, is armed with a wooden sword and a club bristling with sharp points, whilst Madame Goliath, her long black hair and marriage veil floating behind her, has a bouquet and crown of orange blossom. After the marriage in front of the church, the giants go to the Grand' Place, where the fight between David and Goliath takes place. The verses they speak are part of a playlet which was written in the Middle Ages.

First Goliath speaks, his voice boastful and arrogant.

“Insolent dog but a foot high, why do you pursue me stone in hand? Are you then weary of life? . . .”

. David, however, face to face with his assailant, is undismayed by the taunting.

"Just draw near, enemy of the Hebrews, insolent rebel. You dare to prate against God! Mine is the advantage—I have as escort an ever victorious God, his hand just and strong. . . . Oh! Lord! Give power and strength to my arm that I may avenge you for it!"

The boy who is taking the part of David throws a little white ball towards a hole in the giant's wickerwork stomach, the hole through which the man inside the giant looks, in order to see his way. The mayor of the town gives a coin to the shepherd boy, who, even if the ball misses, is always triumphant. However, Goliath, in order no doubt that the play can be acted again the following year, says in a loud cavernous voice:

"Yeah! I am still alive!"

On the Sunday afterwards, in the pageant which goes through the streets, there are other giants besides Goliath and his bride—Ambiorix, Samson, Mademoiselle Victoire who represents the spirit of the town, an eagle, and the Bayard horse with the four sons of Aymon on its back. Decorated floats, one of which is a ship complete with crew and negro prisoner, soldiers in old uniforms, bands, a black-faced devil with an inflated bladder in his hand, and a wild man covered with fresh ivy leaves, all help to swell the procession.

The "human" giants are sometimes accompanied by gigantic cardboard animals called their "menagerie"—animals like lions, eagles, and camels. There are also fierce dragons and the Bayard horse, the four people on its back representing the knights

who fought against the Emperor Charlemagne. One of the most famous of these horses, is that of Dendermonde, a little town in Flanders. The horse, which is about fifteen feet high, takes part in a mock fight held on the Grand' Place. As it prances backwards and forwards over the cobblestones, trying to find a way through the soldiers lining the market-place, the children on its back wave their swords in the air. At last, the twelve men inside the body begin to run, the horse charges the soldiers, and Bayard and his masters are free.

Another kind of fight takes place every year on Trinity Sunday in the Grand' Place at Mons, the capital of Hainaut. It is said that many years ago a fierce dragon which terrorised the surrounding countryside was killed by a knight called Gilles de Chin, lord of a village near Mons. However, Gilles de Chin is really St. George, and the dragon, the spirit of evil. For many years, St. George and the dragon were part of the Trinity Day religious procession of St. Waudru, whose reliquary is carried through the streets on a golden car, but nowadays, the fight only begins when the procession arrives back at the church.

The dragon, which is called the *doudou*, has a painted green cloth body stretched over a wicker-work frame. There is one man inside the framework, and several others dressed in white trousers, coats, and stocking-like caps (those who bear giants or dragons are always in white), help to manipulate the dragon from the outside. As the dragon is circled, the tune, "C'est the doudou", the popular song of Mons, is played on the carillon and by the band, while the fire brigade, in glittering copper

helmets, discharge their guns in the air. The costumes of those who take part in the fight are varied and unusual; there are the chin-chins, their legs in osier baskets covered with linen, to make them look like hobby horses, and the usual wild men, with ivy leaves sewn on their clothes. The chin-chins help St. George, but the wild men protect the dragon with clubs, and try to keep the chin-chins away. Sometimes the dragon sweeps them to the ground with his tail, and even the watching crowd are drawn into the ceremony; as the tail swings backwards and forwards amongst the onlookers, the people try to pull out a bristle. A bristle from the tail of the Mons dragon is said to bring good luck throughout the year, but as soon as the crowd catch hold of it, they are pursued by the wild men with their clubs, and the devils, who, dressed in black cloth with grotesque faces painted on their backs, lash out at the crowd with bladders which are attached to long sticks.

All this time, St. George, resplendent in a red and yellow coat and with a shining helmet of brass, is attacking the dragon, first with lance and sword, and then with an old pistol. When, after the second shot the dragon is finally killed, the firemen shoot their volleys for the last time, and the band and carillon play the "doudou". The crowd disperses and everyone goes home to a good dinner; the traditional fight of St. George and the dragon is over, and the uniforms and wickerwork frames are stored away until the following year.

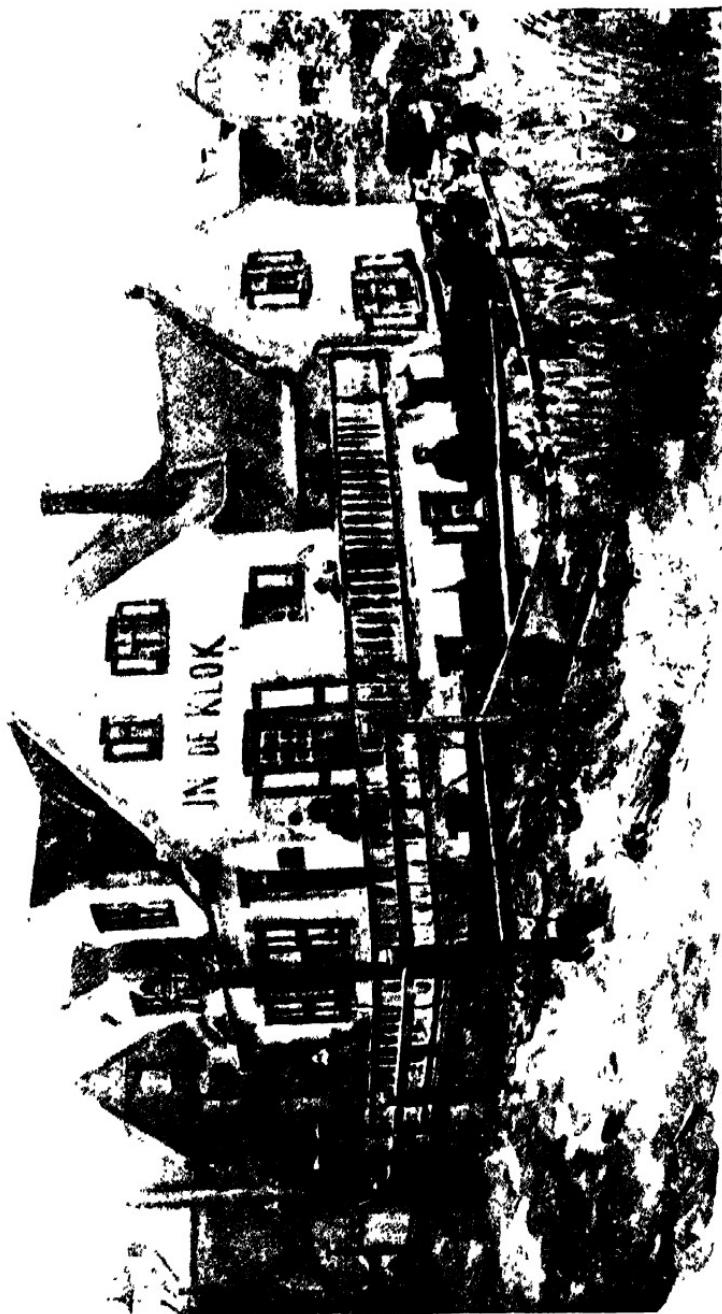
## PAGEANTS AND PROCESSIONS

BELGIUM has been a country of pageants for hundreds of years; as the towns grew larger and became richer, the processions, which had started in a small way, also increased in size and importance. The early processions started with the priests, nuns, and monks carrying the holy images through the streets. They were accompanied by the merchants and armed guilds, the municipal officers and magistrates, and, sometimes, the local lord and his bodyguard. In the fourteenth century the guilds introduced biblical and historical characters. Temporary stages were erected on street corners close to where the procession would pass, and short plays acted to entertain the waiting crowds. Later, the actors performed on carts in the procession itself, a forerunner of the present-day tableaux on floats. The next century saw the introduction of giants, their menageries, and often a dragon and a Bayard horse.

The pageants and processions of the Middle Ages must have been a magnificent sight. There were knights in glittering armour, bishops and priests clad in gorgeous vestments, and standard-bearers, trumpeters, and heralds in their robes of office. From the tall houses, the windows and balconies hung with rich tapestry, and the projecting wooden gables gay with flags and garlanded with branches, the wives and daughters of nobles and wealthy merchants would look down upon the scene. When Flanders was under the rule of France, a French



PLAYING SKITTLES IN THE YARD OF AN INN



queen, riding in procession through the streets of Bruges, said that she understood that she was the only queen in Bruges, but on looking around her she felt that there must be many queens present, as the women folk were so exquisitely dressed.

To-day, the processions and pageants are very different from those of the past. Bruges, Mons, and Furnes, for instance, still have religious processions with tableaux representing scenes from the Bible, but there are no giants and menageries. On the other hand, the great pageants no longer have any religious significance.

The fourth Sunday in Lent, and the three days before Ash Wednesday are a favourite time for carnivals and pageants. Shrove Tuesday is called *Mardi Gras*, that is, "Fat Tuesday", the day on which people can eat and drink as much as they like before beginning to fast for Lent. This is the time when Binche has its gay and colourful pageant, the dance of the *gilles*. The word, *gille*, probably comes from a character in the popular French theatre of past centuries, an actor who performed on the streets and at fairs. On *Mardi Gras*, the *gilles* dance from early morning until nightfall, continuing the dance with torches. Each section of *gilles* has a band; when the drums play alone they walk, but as soon as the bands start up again, they resume their dance. The *gilles* carry wicker baskets laden with oranges, and as they are not particular where they throw them, the citizens of Binche, during carnival time, protect their windows with wire or lengths of board. In the past, a strange assortment of food was thrown to the crowd—nuts, apples, onions, and bread.

The *gilles* wear a costume of fawn linen decorated with black and orange lions, the chest thickly padded with straw. Their clogs are decorated with silken rosettes, and each *gille* has a bell on his chest, and smaller ones round the waist. The elaborate head-gear, which consists of a top hat crowned with ostrich plumes, is worn with a white mask, the eyes of which are outlined in circles. Although the *gilles* are the most important, there are other dancers like the "peasants", who, dressed in blue smocks and small feathered hats, also throw oranges amongst the crowd.

Another interesting folklore pageant takes place at Malmédy in the midst of the pine forests. Malmédy, close to the German border, is on the fringe of the Ardennes, and the "nutons" have found their way into the procession. The costume worn by the men who depict these tiny creatures is specially designed to make them look as small as possible. Immense canvas hats spread over wicker-work reach down to their waists, and to complete the illusion, there are false arms, faces, and beards. The "nutons" have their legs encased in tight check trousers and, during the procession, walk with a queer hopping gait.

Some of the costumes at the Malmédy pageant are traditional; the "wild men" have feathered hats and tunics comprised of pieces of different coloured wood, which, when they move, make a noise like castanets. Others in the procession who are called *haguettes*, carry a *happe-chair*—a kind of wooden trellis-work scissors with pincers at the end, with which they knock off hats and grasp people round the neck and legs. It is said that in the seventeenth

century, thieves, arming themselves with a *happé-chair*, which could be folded up like a fan when not in use, climbed on to the roof tops, and putting the wooden scissors down a chimney, removed anything within reach, particularly sides of ham and other tempting delicacies.

As in other Belgian carnivals, the onlookers have to endure horseplay; men shouldering fifteen-foot brooms swing them backwards and forwards into the crowd, and "bakers" in white trousers, smocks, and porkpie hats, carry long-handled shovels with which they hit people on the back and endeavour to trip them up. The "wild men" carry wooden knives and clubs made of hemp, and even those who stay at home are drawn into the carnival, for sweeps wearing top hats go into the houses with their brushes, and play pranks on everyone they find there.

The list of processions and pageants is almost endless. The *marches militaires* of southern Belgium in which thousands of villagers dress up in old uniforms and shoot volleys in honour of the Almighty, the plague procession of Tournai, and the Flemish festival at Geeraardsbergen (Grammont), where the mayor and aldermen drink wine containing small, live fish—these, and many others, all help to show, that in folklore, Belgium is one of the richest countries on the Continent.

## XV

# SPORT

ARCHERY is the national sport of Belgium, and most towns and villages have a society of archers, called generally after St. Sebastian, their patron saint. The history of this sport goes back to the time when arrows were used in battle, and men had to practise constantly with their bows in order to defend their country. When firearms came into being, and archers were no longer used in warfare, the societies continued to exist for the practice of archery as a sport. The club house of the Bruges company of archers was built with money given by Charles II of England, who, with his brother, Henry, Duke of Gloucester, lived in the town for some time when he was an exile. Queen Victoria, when on a visit to Bruges, also became a member of this society, and afterwards, presented the club with two silver cups for prizes.

In Brussels there is a legend connected with the sport of archery. Years ago, the people of Antwerp had a statue of the Virgin in their church, but because she was old, and rather ugly, they had stopped praying to her. An old woman who lived in the city, feeling sorry for this lonely Virgin, took the statue to Brussels, where the first person she met was an archer on his way to shoot in a competition for the "King of Archers". The old woman told him that he would be "king", and the archer promised that, if he were successful, he would build a chapel to the ugly Virgin. Her words came true,

and the chapel, according to the story, was the beginning of the Grand Sablon church.

The type of archery varies, but one of the most popular forms is shooting at an upward target. Many country villages have a perch, which is often in a meadow on the outskirts, while the town clubs sometimes have covered perches to enable them to shoot in all kinds of weather. The perch consists of a very high pole, crossed near the top by thin spars rather like the yards of a ship. Fixed on these spars, and along the pole itself near the top, are a number of little wooden birds with tufts of feathers on their heads and tails. The man whose turn it is to shoot stands close to the foot of the pole, fits an arrow on his bowstring, aims steadily, and shoots up into the air. The bow is stiff to bend, and unless the bird is hit in the middle, it will not fall to the ground.

There is also another kind of perch which is called a "lying" perch. Here, the arrow is shot at its target down an alleyway which has wooden arches over it to prevent the arrows from rising, and a fence either side to protect the spectators. The medieval type of crossbow is used a great deal in Belgian archery. The bow is heavy and cumbersome, and the arrows, which are usually about six inches long, are tipped with iron.

Although hardly any sport is played in the schools, football is very popular in Belgium. A boy, if he is keen on this sport, can join one of the junior branches of the big league clubs and, in time, may become good enough to play in a first-class game. Another popular sport is *jeu de balle*, a mixture of lawn tennis and fives. The ground is marked out

in two large courts, and each side has five players' who (apart from the server) wear a special protective glove, as the ball is hit with the hand. It is sent over the line which divides the courts, and returned in the same way by a player on the other side. The ball must not touch the ground, and a point is lost by the side which sends a ball outside the lines or the court into which it should have been served or returned.

The *jeu de boule*, which you may hear mentioned in Belgium, is quite different from *jeu de balle*, and is much the same as skittles. It is often played in the yard of an inn, but some farmers have a bowling ground of their own, where they gather with their friends on summer evenings and Sunday afternoons. *Jeu de boule* is usually played by older people.

The Belgians do not play cricket, but in addition to the football clubs there are tennis, hockey, and rowing clubs. Pigeon racing, particularly in Hainaut, is another favourite pastime, the pigeons flying from as far afield as Spain and North Africa. The characteristic flatness of much of the country-side has made the Belgians keen cyclists and, during the summer, there are many long-distance cycle races.

## FLEMISH PAINTING

THE great period of Flemish painting, which began in the fourteenth century and continued for over three hundred years, developed from the decorated books that were made for the nobles and important churchmen. In these illuminated manuscripts, the letters were often ornamented in gold and rich colours, and there were also pictures of Flemish life and landscapes. This was the period when nobles and princes like the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, commissioned artists to do paintings for them. The Belgian churches are rich in *triptychs*—painted altarpieces in three sections. When the nobility travelled, they often took with them the *triptych* that stood upon the family altar. Usually, the wealthy patron wished to be in the picture, so he and his family, although dressed in the clothes of the period, would represent sacred characters; for instance, St. Barbara might be a portrait of Mary of Burgundy. These altarpieces, as well as giving us a vivid picture of contemporary costume, have as their background the cities and countryside that the artist knew and loved.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Van Eyck brothers were the first to realise the possibility of mixing colours in oil. Their altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, which is in the church of St. Bavon at Ghent, is one of the earliest known paintings in oil. This altarpiece, like so many of Belgium's art treasures, has had an eventful history.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the French took the central panel to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it remained until after the fall of Napoleon, and twice during the present century it has been stolen by the Germans—the last recovery was from an Austrian salt mine. Jan Van Eyck's famous painting of his wife also disappeared for a time. It was finally discovered in the fish market at Bruges; the oak on which it was mounted, providing a skinning block for eels.

Although the date and place of his birth are unknown, Hans Memling, like Jan Van Eyck, lived for many years in Bruges. He had numerous patrons, and a small room in St. John's Hospital houses some of his greatest masterpieces.

Pieter Brueghel, who lived in the first half of the sixteenth century, has been called "Peasant Brueghel" or "The Droll", because of his delight in painting amusing pictures of Flemish country life. Brueghel used to go to the village *kermesse* dressed as a peasant, and his canvases are crowded with people, eating, drinking, and enjoying the fun of the fair. The sixteenth century with its Religious Wars and Inquisition was an unhappy time for Flanders, and in scenes like *The Massacre of the Innocents*, Brueghel shows another side of his nature. When he died, his work was carried on by his sons Pieter and Jan, who imitated and copied their father's style of painting.

When the Court left Bruges, the town's greatness in art began to decline. The painters went to Antwerp, where there were many patrons among the rich merchants. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Rubens, one of the world's greatest

painters, settled in this city. He had been court painter to the Duke of Mantua, and brought into his work much of the richness of the Italian Renaissance. This great artist seemed successful in everything he did; honours and wealth were showered upon him and, during a period in England as Spanish Ambassador to the court of Charles I, he was knighted by the king. Commissions for paintings came so fast, that often Rubens only drew in the design and did the finishing off; the remainder of the work was left to his pupils.

Rubens, who was a very prolific painter, has over a thousand paintings to his credit, and Antwerp, which is proud of being the "City of Rubens", contains in its churches and galleries some of the artist's finest canvases.

Van Dyck, like Rubens, studied in Italy, and was influenced by Italian methods. After a period at Antwerp, painting the portraits of princes, nobles, and rich burghers, he was invited to the court of Charles I. It became the fashion to be painted by Van Dyck, and the king and queen, and many of England's leading families, were among his sitters. His portraits, whether of English or Italian nobility, or the wealthy burghers of the Flemish towns, are pervaded with a sense of grace and charm. Van Dyck, who was also knighted by Charles I, died in London in 1641, a year after Rubens.

Over three centuries Flemish art had gained world renown. The seventeenth century saw its decline, but the hundreds of canvases, both in Belgium and overseas, remind the world of the glorious era of Flemish painting.

## APPENDIX

### BENELUX UNION

The Benelux Union is an economic union of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

### CURRENCY

The standard coin is the franc, which consists of 100 centimes. There are coins worth 1, 5, 20, 50, and 100 francs, and 5, 10, 25, and 50 centimes. Belgian notes are issued in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 500, and 1,000 francs. The approximate rate of exchange is 140 francs = £1 sterling. In Luxembourg, Belgian money is legal tender, but the Luxembourg franc is not accepted in Belgium.

### EDUCATION

Education is compulsory in Belgium from 6 to 14 (in the towns, often to 15 or even 16, depending on whether work is available). After six years in the *Primaire*, pupils can enter either:

1. A Lycée (girls) or Athénée (boys).
2. An Ecole Moyenne.
3. An Ecole Professionnelle.

*N.B.*—The syllabus of the *Primaire* covers eight years, and if they wish, pupils can remain there until school leaving age.

The *Lycée* and the *Athénée* correspond roughly to an English Grammar School, the

*Ecole Moyenne*, which has a three-year course, to a secondary modern, and the *Ecole Professionnelle* to a technical school. The *Ecole Normale Moyenne*, which pupils can enter after completing the full primary course, or from a *Lycée (Athénée)*, is a school for the preparation of teachers. There is no training college system in Belgium as we know it, and those who wish to become teachers, continue in the same school with the addition of a teaching course, leaving when they are nineteen or twenty. After completing the course, the students are called *Regents* or *Regentes* (female), and are qualified to teach in an *Ecole Moyenne*.

### UNIVERSITIES

Although there are faculties in other towns, the four main Universities are:

1. The University of Brussels.
2. The State Universities of Ghent (Flemish) and Liège (French).
3. The Catholic University of Louvain (Flemish and French).

### FAMOUS PEOPLE

#### *Kings of Belgium*

- Leopold I (1831-1865).  
Leopold II (1865-1909).  
Albert I (1909-1934).

**Leopold III (1934–1950).**  
**Baudouin I (1951– ).**

*Some Flemish Painters*

Hubert van Eyck (c. 1366–1426).  
 Jan van Eyck (c. 1385–1440).  
 Roger van der Weyden (c. 1400–1464).  
 Hans Memling (c. 1430–1494).  
 Hugo van der Goes (c. 1435–1482).  
 Pieter Brueghel the elder (c. 1525–1569).  
 Pieter Brueghel the younger (c. 1564–1638).  
 Jan Brueghel the elder (c. 1568–1625).  
 Jan Brueghel the younger (1601–1678).  
 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640).  
 Antony van Dyck (1599–1641).  
 Gerard Mercator (c. 1512–1592)—Geographer.  
 Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949)—Author.

**FLAG**

The Belgian flag, which was adopted in 1831, is a black, yellow, and red tricolour.

**GEOGRAPHICAL FACTS ABOUT BELGIUM**

The greatest length—174 miles.

Area—39,030 square miles.

Highest Point—Baraque-Michel in the Hautes Fagnes (2,300 feet).

**GOLDEN FLEECE**

The Order of the Golden Fleece was founded at Bruges, on the 10th January 1430, by the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, to mark the occasion of his marriage to Isabella of Portugal. This Order, which could be given only to kings, princes, and members of the nobility—knights “of rank and beyond reproach”, was, with the Order of the Garter, the most coveted honour in Europe. The Duke was Grand Master of the Order, the aim of which was the spreading of the Catholic faith. Edward IV was a knight of the Order, and in the Cathedral of St. Sauveur in Bruges, the choir stalls are surmounted by shields showing the armorial bearings of twenty-nine knights who attended a meeting of the Golden Fleece in 1478.

To-day, the Order is awarded to princes, members of high nobility, and heads of state. It can be granted only by the Spanish Government, and by Archduke Otto of Hapsburg (Pretender to the throne of Austria).

**GOVERNMENT**

*1. Parliament*

Belgium, like Great Britain, is a constitutional monarchy, and its representative bodies

consist of the Communal Councils, Provincial Councils, Chamber of Representatives, and Senate, corresponding roughly to the English Municipal Councils, County Councils, House of Commons, and House of Lords, though the Senate is not a hereditary body. Candidates for the Chamber of Representatives must be over twenty-five, and the number of members, at present 212, varies with the population. All Senators must be over forty, with the exception of a small number of the Royal Family who become Senators at the age of eighteen.

## 2. *The Constitution*

The Constitution, which was passed on 7th February 1831, guarantees liberty of religion, education, and the press. The Constitution cannot be altered except by a two-thirds majority of the Legislative Body.

## INDUSTRIES

Many of Belgium's industries have been famous for centuries. Flemish cloth and the hammered copper-work of Dinant and the Meuse were prized by the Romans, and the making of tapestries has taken place since the fourteenth century. Other ancient industries are glass blowing,

and the manufacture of small arms; the former developing because sand, which is needed in the glass industry, can be easily obtained.

## *Belgium's Chief Industries*

Brussels carpets (made in Tournai), coal, chemicals, diamonds, glass (domestic, industrial, scientific), hammered copper-work, iron and steel, lace (particularly Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, and Mechlin (Malines)), paper, porcelain, pottery, shipbuilding, small arms, tapestries (particularly Bruges, Brussels, Mechlin (Malines), and Tournai).

## NATIONAL DISHES

*Anguilles au vert*—eels served in vinegar sauce, with shredded green herbs.

*Croquettes aux crevettes*—shrimps in a thick cheese sauce, made into croquettes and cooked for a few minutes in boiling oil.

*Tomates aux crevettes*—tomatoes stuffed with shrimps mixed in mayonnaise.

(These dishes are often served as hors d'œuvres.)

*Moules et frites*—mussels and chips.

*Jambon d'Ardennes*—smoked Ardennes ham.

*Witloof*—Witloof (chicory) is Belgium's national vegetable. The leaves are eaten

raw in salads, or cooked in butter or margarine.

As well as the rich cakes, which are common to all parts of Belgium, each town has its own special pâtisseries, like the *meuds* of Bruges, the *dorée* (rice pastry) of Liège, and the *couques* of Dinant, a kind of gingerbread biscuit.

#### OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

The Belgian Congo, which has an area of approximately eighty times the size of Belgium. The Congo produces gold, copper, radium, and uranium. Rubber, cocoa, coffee, palm nuts, and cotton, are the chief products.

#### POINTS OF INTEREST

##### *Béguinages*

Alost, Anderlecht, Bruges, Courtrai, Ghent, Lierre, Tournai, Louvain, Mechlin (Malines), Tongres, Turnhout.

##### *Carillon Concerts*

Bruges, Dinant, Ghent, Huy, Mechlin (Malines,) Lierre, Tournai, and many others.

##### *Castles*

Annevoie (near Dinant), Beersel (Brabant), Beloeil (Hainaut), Bouillon, Chimay (Hainaut), Gaasbeek (Brabant), Ghent, and many others.

##### *Grottoes*

Comblain, Dinant, Han, Remouchamps, Rochefort.

#### POPULATION

The population of Belgium is 9,026,778 (1957). The ten largest towns are:

Brussels	171,020
(greater Brussels	1,385,831)
Antwerp	256,126
(greater Antwerp	841,686)
Charleroi	26,433
(greater Charleroi	469,383)
Ghent	161,382
Liège	156,612
Mechlin	63,298
Ostend	54,297
Bruges	52,278
St. Nicholas	46,739
Alost	44,179

#### PROVINCES

There are nine Belgian provinces:

Province	Provincial Capital
West Flanders	Bruges
East Flanders	Ghent
Antwerp	Antwerp
Limburg	Hasselt
Brabant	Brussels
Hainaut	Mons
Namur	Namur
Liège	Liège
Luxembourg	Arlon

*N.B.*—On Belgium's eastern border is the small Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which at one time was part of the present Belgian province of Luxembourg.

## SOME PLACE NAMES

<i>English</i>	<i>Flemish</i>	<i>French</i>
Antwerp	Antwerpen	Anvers
Audenaerde	Oudenaarde	Audenarde
Bruges	Brugge	Bruges
Courtrai	Kortrijk	Courtrai
Furnes	Veurne	Furnes
Grammont	Geeraardsbergen	Grammont
Ghent	Gent	Gand
La Panne	De Panne	La Panne
Liège	Luik	Liège
Louvain	Leuven	Louvain
Mechlin	Mechelen	Malines
Mons	Bergen	Mons
Namur	Namen	Namur
Ostend	Oostende	Ostende
Tournai	Doornijk	Tournai
Ypres	Ieper	Ypres

## TRAVEL

Belgium has an extensive system of railway lines. There are three classes, and for travellers, cheap season tickets called *abonnements* are issued for periods of five or ten days or longer. There is no limit to the number of stops, and an *abonnement* enables a traveller to use any of the state railways.

## WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Belgium, like most Continental countries, uses the metric system of weights and measures.

Here are some useful equivalents:

1 kilogram (kg) = 2.2 lbs.

1 litre = 1½ pints.

1 metre = 1,094 yards.

1 kilometre (1,000 metres) =  $\frac{5}{8}$  of an English mile.

## YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

1. There are many youth hostels in Belgium, particularly in the Ardennes. An English youth hostel card is valid in Belgian hostels. Further information can be obtained from: *Centrale Wallone des Auberges de la Jeunesse*, 13 Rue Lefrancq, Brussels.

2. There are other facilities for parties of 'young people, accompanied' by a teacher, who wish to stay in day or boarding schools, or to make use of other accommodation offered by the various youth movements. Further information from: *Service d'Etudes de Documentation*, Ministère de l'Instruction Publique, 155 Rue de la Loi, Brussels.

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